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Sinapia, A Political Journey to the Antipodes of Spain

Miguel A. Ramiro Avilés

*Veracity or verisimilitude, this republic is very worthy of praise, since it has succeeded better than might have been expected or, at least, has set an example for those who wish to succeed.*¹

The Description of Sinapia, a peninsula in terra australis (henceforth *Sinapia*) summarizes the anxiety and pain felt by the authors of the Spanish Enlightenment contemplating the decadence of their country, its institutions and people. It reflects an Enlightenment interest in the improvement both of the human condition and of forms of government. *Sinapia* is an account of an imaginary Spain located in *terra australis* where the best remedies for the reform of souls and institutions have been implemented. It is an invitation to consider the distance between how things are in Spain and how things might be in its antipodes, *Sinapia*.

Sinapia is a rare text because, although it is not the first Spanish utopia, like More's *Utopia* it uses law and the formal institutions of government as a basis on which to build the ideal society. The text was lost until the 1970s when it was discovered in the archives of Pedro Rodríguez, Count of Campomanes. Its close links with *Utopia*, and some other utopian texts, are most obvious in its reiteration of common ideas or its reproduction of passages, a practice which lessens the sense of its own originality – '[the prince] directs surplus population to the colonies, and orders the return of colonists when population declines' (91/20).² The text's long disappearance means that even today we do not know who the author is or when the work was written.

Scholars have discussed whether Campomanes was the author or if one of his close circle wrote *Sinapia*.³ We should perhaps recall that utopian writers have often been close to power. The discussion in Book I of *Utopia* is on precisely this: whether philosophers should be the counsellors of kings and princes.⁴ James Harrington and Gerrard Winstanley both dedicated their utopias to Oliver Cromwell.⁵ Utopian writers often formulate a vision of the best society and hope to insinuate their ideas by indirect means, as Thomas More proposed in *Utopia*. They long to find an educated or enlightened prince or patron who will assume the responsibility of implementing their proposals.⁶ In *Sinapia*'s

case that might be Campomanes, who was President of the Council of Castille from 1786 to 1791 and planned, with Pablo de Olavide, Intendent of Seville, the repopulation of the Sierra Morena, restoring a traditional agrarian society of small peasants.⁷

The passage selected above contains, I think, two ideas which may be useful in reading *Sinapia* afresh. First, it is the author's intention that a fictional story – the description of the institutions and customs of the republic of Sinapia – should be considered a true or plausible account, one possessed of verisimilitude. Second, the way in which Sinapia is socially and institutionally arranged should be thought of as an example to be followed in undertaking the reforms necessary to transform reality in Spain.

The author does not want *Sinapia* to be read 'as a novel' (70/1) in which monsters and unlikely situations are described since the aim of the book is not to discover man-eating Lestrygonians but something even more strange and unusual – one republic wisely governed.⁸ His desire is that *Sinapia* be considered as a true story and a practical model in ethics and politics. Maybe he wanted to evade the censorship exercised by the Council of Castille and the Inquisition and maybe this is the reason why he made use of the literary form – making his utopia look like an avatar for the genre of the novel.⁹ In those same years, José de Cadalso confessed: '[T]he spaniard who publishes his works today writes them very carefully, and he trembles when he manages to print them ... At that point many men, whose compositions would be useful for them and confer honour on their country, hide them.'¹⁰

Sinapia could be read as a sketch of a social and political culture turned inside-out, one where the author hides behind the mask of an impartial critic engaged in the analysis of the customs and practices followed in Sinapia. Impartiality was a quality much appreciated by Spain's Enlightenment authors because they considered, to use Cadalso's words again, that 'this just balance is what assures us that a man has the full use of his reason'.¹¹

The utopian literary form allowed the author of *Sinapia* to avoid presenting his readers with reform policies to be legitimated and adopted. Instead, the readers were offered a political project already implemented and legitimized by the rationality, fairness and justice of its arrangements as they were vividly experienced in the lives and characters of the populace. The republic of Sinapia was a microcosm set in motion as an entire and functioning society, as complex as the real macrocosm, and with a plausible life (verisimilitude). 'The method of describing a functioning society, with all its components and details, only emphasizes their practical and realistic intentions: the fabricated authenticity makes ideas into concrete, believable facts.'¹²

Verisimilitude was achieved both by populating the account with real facts¹³ and by proposing reforms which depended neither on the transformation of human nature and the natural environment nor on supernatural force but which were solely dependent on human capacity and activity. In this sense,

it was a hypothesis about the possibilities of human action.¹⁴ It was possible to implement the reforms described, to imagine them as possible options confronting the *status quo*, even if they could not be accommodated in current conceptual language and would not be adopted as active policies in the current political climate.¹⁵ The utopian text then inhabits a space in which it was free to develop a theory transformative of the material conditions which could underwrite fundamental social change.¹⁶

Verisimilitude, or plausibility, then went along with *estrangement* because one object (the kingdom of Spain) was represented in such a way (as republic of Sinapia) that it could be easily recognized but, at the same time, it was unfamiliar to the readers due to the scale of social, political and legal change.¹⁷ For example, the author observed that people raised under a system of private property ('mine and yours') could barely be persuaded that people could live in perfect community and perfect equality (70/1).

The plausibility of its proposals reflects the political content of *Sinapia*. It is a wisely governed republic, with implications for the reform of the social, economic, religious, political and legal conditions of contemporary Spain. It is a union of diverse peoples – 'malay, peruvian, chinese and persian' (72/3) – in which 'the monarch is the law, the nobles are the magistrates and the people are the families' (86/13). *Sinapia*'s author follows the republican formula of a perfect government combining the rule of the one, the few and the many, where nobility is not hereditary but by election, and magistrates, including the prince, are chosen 'by the nomination of those who are to obey and by the election of those who are to command' (119/28).

Founded by the persian prince Sinap, the persian patriarch Codabend and the chinese philosopher Si-Ang,¹⁸ the republic of Sinapia, previously named Bireia, is not only antipodean to Spain in a geographical sense – 'the climate of this peninsula is like Spain's but the seasons are reversed, with the longest day of the year about Christmas and the shortest about the festival of Saint John' (72/2) – but also socially, economically, religiously, politically and legally. The Australasian location facilitates its conversion into the perfectly reflected inversion of its model.

That reversal is indicated from the very first pages. In Sinapia it is shocking that European societies follow the teachings of Tacitus and Machiavelli in their politics, forgetting that 'the practice of Christian virtue is better suited to building a flourishing republic and a blessed nation' (69/1). Christianity had arrived with the Persians, 'who brought the light of Gospel and true politics with it' (73/3).

The prince presides over the Senate and the General Assembly, and the patriarch is the head of the Synod. These three institutions are entrusted with all important government functions: legislation; the sending and receiving of embassies; the making of war, peace and alliances; the naturalization of foreigners; the liberation of slaves; approving and monitoring all office-holders,

including the prince; allowing or forbidding all types of innovation and publication; establishing new colonies; and regulating the welfare of the people and the shortage or abundance of things (90–1/20, 110/25). The reform of the customs, canons and laws shows that in Sinapia the *leggi* can be changed but the *ordini* remain unchangeable; a certain flexibility is possible while the fundamental laws remain unaltered. Some practices against the *ordini* had been attempted ‘but this had been checked by prompt punishment of the few who had this opinion, because since childhood they are well-educated in the advantages of this form of government’ (134/33).

Despite its possible side effects, science is very important in the republic of Sinapia:

This College has really been of great utility to the nation, because, by their means, every day they make advances in natural sciences to a point which will be difficult to believe in Europe, with very useful inventions for the conservation and alleviation of human life, closing the doors to harmful innovations and inventions that could be spread by communication with foreigners, while, at the same time, acquiring an adequate knowledge of all the works of merit of the other nations ... and, with the help of the translations that are allowed with great prudence ... saving the republic from every thing that is harmful and useless.¹⁹ (126–7/30)

One of the distinguishing features of Sinapia is that ‘mine and yours is cast out’ because private property is seen as the root cause of every social dispute. For this reason, they have formal institutions to provide the people with ‘whatever they need’ (91/21). At the end of the book, the author defends the community of goods against those who could use Aristotle’s ideas saying that the power of education in Sinapia and the example of the parents and magistrates are the key elements (132/33).

Another important aspect of Sinapia is the reform it has undergone to make the Christian religion ‘rational and pious’ (75/3). In particular, the training and election of its priests, who must have served as deacons for ten years, guarantees their fluency in Hebrew and Greek, and their command of Holy Writ and ecclesiastical history (94/22). In Sinapia ‘the christian religion is the only faith but one without hypocrisy, superstition or vanity’ (93/22) and they strive to restore primitive Christianity as embodied in ‘the discipline observed in the third and fourth centuries’. It is forbidden to probe into the mysteries of the faith and people must be content to simply believe them, ‘without indulging their curiosity’. Thanks to these reforms, ‘religion [is] free of error and superstition. Care is taken to avoid all novelty and tenuousness in the doctrines of faith. They escape any kind of violence and excessive roughness in their religious discipline and limit the clergy to only the essential, and those proven, learned, without private possessions and employed only in the ministry’ (133/33).

Another principal area of reform is that of the structure and laws of the republic: ‘[B]uilding the settlement and laws of their republic, they were

prudent legislators introducing reforms not at a blow, which was impossible, but step by step' (76/3). With legal and institutional transformation, the causes of many crimes disappeared, but they remain necessary tools. The solution is not the absence of laws (*anomia*) but new, fairer laws and institutions. The utopian solution is to simplify the complexity of the legal system, creating legal certainty by a schematic system of laws. The people are instructed in their laws every day in the morning (103/24) so that everyone knows the rules which govern their lives and to which they owe their social peace (99/23). Sinapia is a law-based utopia where there is *eunomia* because the system comprises few laws, which must be published and clearly written in the vernacular so that everybody can understand them.²⁰

The book of Sinapian law, made by the three founders of the state and supplemented and amended by the General Assembly of the nation (which alone has this authority) is written in the native language, in a pure style, and in free verse. The laws are brief, clear, giving no cause for contention but commanding and forbidding absolutely and the date of the law's origin is noted in the margin. Whenever they add a law, another is repealed, in order not to increase the number to be observed.

The interpretation of doubtful laws is done by the Senate but such decisions are valid only for one particular case and cannot be appealed to in other cases in the future (116/26). Legal rules in the law-based Utopia are usually interpreted in the simplest way and literally, 'the bare letter of the law'.

In the administration of justice, they draw a distinction between ecclesiastical and civil jurisdictions: 'Any jurisdiction exercised by prelates, whether over the laity or the clergy, is restricted to matters of conscience and the spiritual penalties of excommunication or privation of clerical status. In civil cases everyone is subject to the magistrates' (96/22). The tempo of justice is reinvigorated: '[A]ll judgements are summary, circumstantial evidence is taken as proof and witnesses are under oath, and for the slightest offence they can be condemned, without appeal, to perpetual slavery' (114/26). The anonymous author has a good knowledge of court proceedings because he knows that proof derived from circumstantial evidence should not be adequate to condemn anyone, and he resolves the problem of perjury with a very hard penalty. Judges cannot increase or diminish the punishments set by the laws (115/26). They can only apply the law, being, as Montesquieu stated, 'the mouth that pronounces the words of the law, mere passive beings, incapable of moderating either its force or rigour'.²¹

The rationality of the legal system can also be seen in the proportionality, defended by Beccaria, between crimes and punishments, applied equally to slaves and foreigners, and the gravity of the crime also influences the right of appeal against the penalty's imposition. They have almost succeeded in dispensing with capital punishment and have prohibited torture, judging it 'inhuman and uncertain' (114/26).

The other cornerstone of the republic of Sinapia is education, on which depends 'the conservation and the well-being of the republic' (116/27). The author professes a belief in the power of education and knowledge to mould better people and thus a better society.²² Sinapia is inhabited by people who, in the main, voluntarily and spontaneously follow the rules, leaving only a minority of recalcitrants. This kind of general observance of the laws allows them to be seen as no more than customary behaviour. Usually, law-based utopias do not seek to gain compliance with the laws through force as a permanent instrument, because such a strategy could weaken the legitimacy and stability of the system in the long term. Its aspiration is rather that the people should agree with the content of the laws, an objective which could be achieved by developing an educational system infused with the same principles. The emphasis here is on the importance of duty: 'To realise genuine honour and true delight ... can only be achieved when our conscience is assured that all our duty has been done' (134/33).

Moderation, fairness and the subordination of the self to society are the norms which are defended in Sinapia. The idea of happiness for everybody, as a goal attainable through mutual understanding, prevails. 'All doubt comes to an end when we consider the aim that this republic has in its foundation – to live with moderation, devotion and fairness in this world awaiting the promised bliss with the glorious coming of our great God, so that no means are more appropriate than life in common, equality, moderation and work' (70/1). *Sinapia* is, therefore, one product of the Enlightenment but in Spain that had not the same reach as elsewhere in Europe – 'the reception of a more critical Enlightenment discourse was not easy for those who kept abreast of the new ideas in Spain. Often alien ideas had to be decontaminated or transformed'.²³ *Sinapia* illustrates the contradiction besetting Spanish Enlightenment authors: intellectual loyalty to the ideals of the Enlightenment as against emotional loyalty to the national tradition. The author seems to look outwards from Spain in search of critical norms but he is also looking towards Spain as the only context where he can find some personal and human identity.²⁴