The Endless Sea

"If you want to build a ship, don't drum up the men to gather wood, divide the work, and give orders. Instead, teach them to yearn for the vast and endless sea."

Antoine de Saint Exupery

The Endless Sea is a new narrative project by More in Common inspired by Antoine de Saint Exupery's words. Over the course of our navigation we will explore a broad array of topics with the aim of shaping a bold new body of thought and practice in favor of social and environmental transformation.

JOURNAL DE BORD 01

At the close of the 15th century, Portuguese navigators on their way to the Indies made a surprising discovery. In order to cross the Cape of Good Hope and reach the fabulous ports of India, the best route was not to sail along the African shore, but rather to cross the Atlantic Ocean, make a stop in Brazil, and then take advantage of the favourable winds that push southeast to cross the Cape and finally land on the shores of the Indian Ocean. This acrobatic feat, which the Portuguese call the "volta do mar", the turn of the sea, is the nautical-metereological secret of today's globalization.

As we set sail for the Endless Sea, this seems to be a good lesson to keep in mind: when navigating the high seas the shortest route is not always the best one. On the contrary, many detours are necessary to reach one's goal.

And then again, as François Hollande told our Mathieu, "no one ever talks about Compostela, everyone talks about Compostela's Walk".

For this reason, my Journal de Bord (or log-book, which sounds far less exciting in English) will initially be made up of a series of detours. And it is only when we have reached our first port of landing, at the end of Spring, that I will try to draw some initial conclusions and trace a more precise map for the next stages of our journey. The milder weather should help too.

DETOUR 01 – UTOPIAS

Utopias are one very interesting by-product of the age of maritime exploration that took place in the late fourteen hundreds. Thomas More's masterpiece would be impossible to understand if one didn't place it within the context of the discovery of new worlds that sparked the imagination of its author and made tangible the existence of a radically different elsewhere.

I won't bore you with general considerations on the subject (even if I admit to having let myself become distracted for some time by the sirens of authors who have explored the theme of utopias and their various functions) and will content myself with distilling some elements that I think will be useful for our navigation:

1. The need for a sense of utopia is deeply rooted in the human soul and widespread at all latitudes. In this video, the American anthropologist Michael Franchetti tells us he was surprised to find among the few objects present in most of the yurts of Mongolian shepherds were photographs of tropical beaches: the Seychelles, Maldives… (technically these are not so much Utopias as Heterotopias, but let's not veer off towards that debate right now).

2. According to Paul Ricœur, utopias have one main function: "The effect of a utopia is to question what exists in the present, he writes, it makes the present world seem strange. We are usually tempted to affirm that we cannot lead another life than the one we are leading now. But the idea of utopia introduces a sense of doubt that shatters the obvious".

Utopia acts like Cartesian doubt or like the sense of wonder that presides over the birth of philosophy. It does this with an imaginary narrative, without necessarily telling us if it wants to be realized or not. It teaches us to think by reinventing, to return to reality after having left it for a moment, to better put it in question.

At a time like the one we are currently experiencing, utopias can function as valuable resources to help us bridge the "hope gap" between the desire for radical change, after the pandemic, and the expectation that significant change will actually not take place, a preoccupation that runs deep throughout European societies.

3. Even before the pandemic, clear signs pointed in the direction of a multiplication of so-called "intentional communities." Between 1976 and 2016, "Communities" magazine calculated a threefold increase in their number in the United States alone. For this reason, some have spoken of a "fifth wave" in the establishment of communes after the 1790-1805, 1824-1848, 1890-1915 and 1965-1975 periods[1].

What's even more significant is that, compared to the past, today there is an increasing emphasis on the importance of the relationship of these experiments to the outside world, rather than on the illusion of radical self-sufficiency. The long-term survival of any intentional community depends on its ability to maintain relations with the surrounding society. Many members are now aware of this and of the fact that they can act at the margins to influence ways of living together in the larger society. People don't stay in these communities their whole lives - five to nine years on average - and afterwards, when they return to live in mainstream society for various reasons, they continue to promote community values to work in the spaces they reintegrate.

4. Among the examples of utopias that I have reviewed during this phase, my favourite - and in my opinion one of the most important - is the Monte Verità. Why? Because it ended up having a huge - albeit largely unacknowledged - global influence, perhaps, and because it is European as well, I think it serves as a virtuous example of utopia here.

In the autumn of 1900, a small group of young German non-conformists settled on a hill near Ascona, on the Swiss side of Lake Maggiore. Two musicians, a painter with an ascetic spirit, an ex-soldier of the Habsburg army, a girl passionate about esotericism and the heir to an industrial dynasty: they were dreamers, rebellious spirits seeking a new life in harmony with nature, far from the social conventions of the bourgeois society that was still triumphant at the time, before the catastrophe of the First World War. They let all of their hair grow long, practiced veganism, and yoga, nudism, indulged in "light baths", free love and a form of improvised dance that involved new steps and movements never seen before.

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[1] Nicholas A. Christakis, Blueprint: The Evolutionary Origins of a Good Society, p.71.

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Theirs was not a Luddite experiment. Quite the opposite: the idea was to put the most advanced technologies of the time at the service of a new life project. "We make judicious use of all the tools made available by science and modern hygiene," wrote Henri Oedenkoven, one of the community's founders, in 1903, "we lack nothing".

They had even acquired a source of water there, in the vicinity, to produce electricity and thus get the light and energy to run their machines. "We want everyone, without having to leave the area, to be able to have everything they want at their fingertips, without the help of servants. Given the simplicity of our way of life and with the help of modern machinery capable of producing everything, everyone will be able to provide for themselves[2]".

Baptized "Monte Verità," within a few years the commune became a magnet for hundreds of writers, artists, scientists and philosophers, including Hermann Hesse, Mary Wigman, Max Weber, Erich Maria Remarque, Carl Gustav Jung and Erich Mühsam.

The experiment itself only lasted for about twenty years and was marked from the very beginning by the disputes and ruptures that always accompany this kind of attempt, but its influence on the culture and history of the twentieth century has been considerable.

In many ways, the counterculture of the 1960's can be said to have been invented on the shores of a Swiss lake: from clothing styles to psychedelic music, meditative practices of oriental origin, the sexual revolution and the seeds of contemporary ecology.

Even Apple has its origins on Monte Verità. In the seventies, Steve Jobs was such a maniacal follower of a diet largely based on the consumption of apples, developed by Arnold Ehret, one of the original inhabitants of the Monte Verità later transplanted to the United States, that he decided to baptize his start-up with the name of his favourite fruit.

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[2] Quoted in Stefan Bollmann, Monte Verità: 1900, il primo sogno di una vita alternativa, 2019, Torino, EDT, p.67.

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Beyond the anecdotes, the impact that a tiny Alpine community, now largely forgotten, has had - and continues to have - on Western society demonstrates the role that utopias can play in transforming reality.

Analysing the history of Monte Verità and, above all, the ideas that started there, landing on West Coast campuses in the Sixties, before conquering the world (and now are reincarnated in the form of slogans to sell sneakers and Mindfulness apps), it seems to me that at least three interesting principles emerge for the continuation of our navigation.

And, as often occurs with interesting concepts, these principles actually take the form of paradoxes.

First paradox: a successful utopia requires a core group of "prophets in the wilderness", true believers that are ready to make sacrifices to advance their uncompromising vision of what the good life should be.

At the same time, however, in order to spread, utopia needs heretics and traitors who will adopt parts of it and modify others, adapting it to the moving realities of the external world, sometimes out of conviction, but also out of simple opportunism. The pioneers of Monte Verità would be horrified if they could witness some of the forms their ideas and practices have taken in the subsequent decades.

Yet, only a certain degree of corruption of the purity of the original vision, its contamination by the logics of politics, fashion or the market, can allow its diffusion beyond the circle of the faithful and its transformation into a mass movement capable of producing a real impact on society at large.

Second paradox: a successful utopia must combine a high, or rather, grand vision of reality, a very bold, broad vision, like the horizon of the Endless Sea, with small and concrete steps that can give everyone the daily impression of having set out in the right direction, to give it a sense of tangible possibility that involves each and everyone of its believers. Monte Verità's "followers" shared the dream of a general rebirth for humanity, but their daily life was made up of small rituals, from meditation exercises, to dietary discipline, which - while waiting for the global palingenesis - gave shape to their individual existence and transformed each one of them into a model agent of this new new world. This is the principle that Peter Slotedijk talks about in a

book that will be fundamental for the continuation of our navigation. In "You Must Change Your Life"[3], the German philosopher re-writes history through the lens of what he calls "anthropotechnics": the "techniques of individual and collective self-transformation" through which we live our lives and construct our world.

Third paradox: the utopian impulse always stems from a radical critique of the existing world. It has within it the germ of subversion of the present order - and of the establishment that guarantees its perpetuation. The success of this impulse, however, always depends on its ability to reach beyond the negative reality in order to affirm a new positive model.

An interesting case of utopia that has turned into a mass movement today by making the most of the three paradoxes we have identified is veganism.

Monte Verità was one of its forebears, but the official foundation of the Vegan Society dates back to 1944, when a woodwork teacher in a secondary school of the British midland, Donald Watson, his wife Dorothy, and four friends, decided to turn their lifestyle into what would become a worldwide movement. Vegan stood for "the beginning and the end of vegetarian" because veganism carried vegetarianism to its logical conclusion.

For several decades, veganism remained at the fringes of western society, practiced only by a narrow group of hippies and non-conformists: the prophets in the wilderness from which all utopias originate. To turn itself into a practice shared by millions around the world, which has become the basis of a food revolution that has just begun to unfold its effects, however, the movement had to open up to the most varied forms of contamination.

It is not difficult to imagine the astonishment with which the founders of the small association in the British province of 1944 would contemplate the endless array of movie stars, business start-ups, cookbooks, YouTube channels, trendy events and polemical documentaries that claim today to be inspired by their teaching. Nowadays big chains such as Marks & Spencer and Prêt a Manger have introduced vegan ranges, Wagamama has a new vegan menu, Pizza Hut recently joined Pizza Express and Zizzi in offering vegan pizzas, while in 2017 Guinness went vegan and stopped using fish

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[3] Malden MA, Cambridge UK, Polity Press, 2013.

bladders in its brewing process, after two and a half centuries[4]. But the arrival on board of a whole series of unexpected travel companions, sometimes uncomfortable and difficult to reconcile with the original setting of the prophets, is the price to pay to allow a utopian project to become part of a broader reality.

Our second utopian paradox is also one of the strong points of veganism: although the movement's ultimate goal is to put an end to animal suffering by establishing a new relationship between humans and the ecosystem in which they are immersed, its action takes the very concrete form of an individual practice, a daily self-discipline that transforms each adherent into an actor and a model of the ideal world they wish to build.

Yet - and here is the decisive point - veganism remained a marginal practice as long as it stood out as a negative agenda. A more restricted, poorer diet is not, in itself, an attractive proposition. As long as the vegan practice was identified with a sacrifice, the removal of animal ingredients that condemned those who practiced it to eat roots and salads, its followers remained few.

It was only when it took on a positive, aspirational connotation that veganism started coming out of the woods.

Netflix documentaries played a role in this direction, as did Internet sensation Ella Mills, better known as Deliciously Ella, who turned the vegan diet into a creative lifestyle. As Keegan Kuhn, a leading producer of vegan-inspired documentaries phrase it: "Whereas before veganism was viewed as giving something up, now it's being reframed in terms of what you gain, in terms of your health, having a greater sense of living within the boundary of your values, gains in terms of the environment"[5].

THE PROBLEM WITH THE BIG SWITCH

In general terms, it is quite obvious that as long as change is identified with a minus sign, its opponents will outnumber its proponents. At a seminar

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[4] Dan Hancox, The unstoppable rise of veganism: how a fringe movement went mainstream, The Guardian, Sunday 1 April 2018.

[5] Charles Leadbeater, The Rising, Draft paper, London, 2018.

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organized by Global Progress in Copenhagen in the fall of 2019, Dutch political strategist Hans Anker enumerated all of the things that change advocates give the impression of wanting to take away from ordinary people.

Here's the list:

Fire places - diesel cars - men's restrooms - women's restrooms - loud music in discotheques - soda machines at school - Easter fires - Christmas trees - steaks - dirty jokes - jokes about Belgians - cigarettes - borders - cowboy suits for kids - Indian suits for kids - air trips - salt - Easter eggs - fire crackers - candies - Black Pete - Santa Claus - fast food - light bulbs - fluorescent lights - halogen lights - cock fighting - barbecue - terrace warmers - goldfish bowls - female dolls - male dolls - sugar - white bread - carbs - foie gras - driving at 130 km/h - feeding wild animals - party balloons - and more, much more...

This idiosyncratic list, to which it would be easy to add many other items, gives an idea of the magnitude of the challenge.

By conceiving "The Good Life 2.0" project, WBCSD and Havas have tried to imagine what would happen if marketing experts who have successfully fuelled consumer desires for about a century stopped promoting an unsustainable lifestyle and started supporting "a world where better beats bigger, where smarter consumption beats excessive consumption and where more time beats more stuff". The results are still very patchy, but I recommend you take a look at them here.

The problem with the big switch from negative to positive, however, goes well beyond the consumer realm.

As we know, the objective of our navigation is the search for "a narrative moon-shot: the articulation of an overarching hopeful vision able to make people yearn for the vast and endless sea, a holistic vision of what a 'good life' might mean in the 2020s and beyond for our communities and our societies".

If we look around, however, the prevalence of negative narratives seems overwhelming. This is not just a phase and not just about politics. It's the same in all fields: in the media world, bad news prevails over good news; in

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cinema and television, dystopias and catastrophic movies and series prevail over optimistic scenarios. This is not a cyclical fact, but a structural element.

For millennia, humans have inhabited a world teeming with deadly dangers, in which the fitness cost of overreacting to a threat was less than the fitness cost of underreacting[6]. Reason why, even today our attention is spontaneously directed towards bad news and more pessimistic narratives, at the expense of positive visions.

Negative stories capture our attention more easily, they activate the reptilian brain, suggesting fight or flight. The big switch from negative to positive is necessary for whoever wants to generate a real desire for change, but the cruel truth is that, in the immediate, it almost always produces a drop in energy. Whether in a bookstore, a movie theatre, on Twitter, or in a political meeting, dystopian visions and negative narratives of the future trump optimism and positivity. And the risk for those who try to advance the latter is always to be met with polite indifference.

The dispersion of energy produced by the shift from negative to positive is, in my view, one of the central problems we will face on our quest: the first of the many dragons we will encounter as we navigate uncharted waters.

Producing positive messages and narratives is not particularly difficult in and of itself. What is difficult is making sure they contain enough energy to first capture attention and then actively mobilize the people they are directed at. While, for example, More in Common research tells us that a vast majority of Americans agree with the statement "America can be both strong and compassionate. We can protect our borders from criminals and terrorists at the same time as we welcome immigrants who respect our laws and embrace American values", might be a useful message to defuse tensions, it doesn't mean that it contains enough energy to actually mobilize a majority of citizens around it. The same holds true for most of the topics that are now dominated by increasingly toxic narratives. Most attempts to replace them with more optimistic, positive visions lack the energy required to successfully mobilize large swaths of people.

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[6] Steven Pinker, The Psychology of Pessimism, in "Cato's Letter", Volume 13, Number 1, Winter 2015.

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For this reason, the next stage of our navigation will consist in exploring a series of recent cases of groups and movements that have managed to overcome the problem of the drop in energy produced by the switch from negative to positive. These cases are very diverse, ranging from a small Swiss association (Operation Libero) to a giant global movement (Fridays For Future), from a successful electoral campaign (Jacinda Ardern 2017) to an alternative festival (Burning Man), passing through a municipal election (Istanbul 2019), a duo of activist pranksters (The Yes Men), a civic network (Nossas), a youth mobilization (Le Sardine), more environmental movements (Extinction Rebellion, Sunrise), to the transformation of a single-issue party into a political force capable of running for the government of Europe's most powerful country (Die Grünen).

In their often extreme diversity, these cases (and others we will come across along the way) will provide us with some examples of how to make the big switch from negative to positive without loosing energy, but rather generating a new form of it.

Meanwhile, many other detours will be necessary to search for sources of narratives marked by both high positivity and high energy. From the precedents of the Thirties to science-fiction stories, the construction of national grand narratives to TV series, to the world of contemporary art - without ever losing sight of the scientists and thinkers who, with their ideas alone, help to illuminate our course – there's no lack of supplies to feed the next "journals de bord" and continue our navigation of the Endless Sea.

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Thank you for reading this first instalment in our log book as we set sail for an unknown destination. Please get in touch with Giuliano da Empoli giulianodaempoli@usa.net if you want to embark on this journey with us.