Auroville, as utopia, project and reality: anthropological views

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Research and/in/on Auroville

• Connected personally but above all as a scholar
• Starting point: seeing Auroville as a scholar and from a scholar viewpoint
• Academic databases: researches conducted on agriculture, energy, architecture, aesthetics…
• Social sciences and humanities: scarce studies / one monograph (R. Minor) on a particular aspect (secularism)
• Auroville as ‘experimental’ site and city, a place for innovation
• Hybrid complex of different repertoires of utopia: education, spiritual, ecological, technological, cultural…
• Aurovilians quest for knowledge and wisdom – a researcher ‘soul’
• ‘Science’ is equally meaningful than ‘spirituality’ here
Explaining a posture and a method

• As an anthropologist
  – Outsider but attempting to understand from the inside
  – Study based on interviews / observations / review of literature / analysis of online information (2013-2018)
  – A series of interviews: André T., André H., Alain B., Fredrick, Ann, Joss, Geneviève, Louis, Aster, Cristo, Luigi…
  – Posture: sympathy but distance
  – Using discours, writings, and hypertextual information to reconstruct motivations, subjective narratives, ideals
  – Draw interpretations from the fieldwork material and not just from subjective experience
  – Attempt to be faithful to the local experience and cultural frames but establish objective theories
  – Sometimes different to what the local people think of themselves
Auroville in context

• Understanding Auroville, from the outside, or what can it be compared to in order to understand what

• Transhistorical comparison with other spiritual and utopian projects in history

• Transcultural comparison with other projects in different geographic and cultural locations

• Issues in context:
  – Historical: founded in 1968 (context of spiritual projects established on utopian views, whilsts more recent ones are reactions against dystopian – apocalyptic – conceptions)
  – Ideological: mix in between Indian roots (Aurobindo’s works on classical Hindu teachings), European modern esotericism (Mother’s first appeal to spirituality) and science
  – Cultural: India used to be / and still is a ‘mystical territory’ in the moral geography of secular Europe, and the site of a ‘spatial therapy’ according to Bruckner (1983)
Auroville and the issue of « utopia »

• Why refering to the concept of utopia?

• Utopia is in the common lexicon of visitors, observers, and sometimes Aurvolians themselves

• Between academic and insiders’s meaning : a project (the overman), a site (the area), different places (pavilions, communities, Matrimandir…), a laboratory for « social spiritual experiment’ (Meier, 2006) a reference (‘a sanctuary’, quoting one interview), a touristic place you have to visit in your ‘adventures’…

• Relavance of concept for ‘indigenous’ (those who live here), for medias and for scholars

• Utopia serves a tool for criticism and irony (medias)

• The issue here : is it an utopia and why does it need to be labelled as such?
French medias and the image of Auroville

Utopia as « failure naïve illusion » or as « uncompleted »
Auroville’s ambivalent position in the issues regarding utopia

• Scholars, journalists and students refer to Auroville as yardstick to appraise the theoretical issue of utopia and to evaluate

• A simplified view focusing on one dimension (self-managed organisation, ecological or architectural productions, perspectives on education, and of course, the spiritual system)

• A model of but not always a model for modern utopias (who / where referring to Auroville as reference?)

• Difficulties to categorize auroville ix between different utopian repertoires (ecological, social, scientific, educational, spiritual, ecological …) appeared in different times (spiritual, 15th, social, 19th, architectural, 1930s, libertarian, 1960s, survivalist, 1980s…)

• ‘Utopia’ but firmly supported by UNESCO and the State of India, as well by networks of followers / sympathizers
Recalling the issue of utopia on solid grounds

• Auroville as utopia?
  – Spiritual utopia: The making of a supermanhood or ‘overman’
  – A radically new model of society: Thomas More and other ideal cities
  – In practice established after Roger Anger’s plans from Mother’s vision
  – Universalist project in a cultural surroundings: not a rejection but the inclusion of cultural differences and nationalities
  – A complex architectural realization and toponymy illustrating the worldview (≠ most of other contemporary utopian communities whose environment is just functionally adapted to the)
  – Expect 50 000, less than 3000: a ‘failure’? What is the time scale of reference and the demographic threshold?
  – If Auroville is a site for the evolution of manhood, then as a place for such a transition needs time
  – Leaving Auroville (for ex-Aurovilians or newcomers) can also be a way to let the utopia unaffected by the tough living conditions
What makes the difference?

- More’s utopia or Rabelais’ Thélème: imagined ideal cities, while Auroville has been built
- It is grounded on earth – the soil and the planet
- Issues in demography: small groups disappear quickly after their foundation so 2500 is above the level
- Organization: integration of different individuals with different status (visitors, newcomers, aurovilians)
- ‘as many Aurovilles than there are Aurovilians’ – variations in subjective commitment to the basics but common references
- Auroville is not an utopia but a mixture of different utopias serving a same aim – not only ecological, liberal, political, spiritual in purpose
The power of an ideal

• the first reflections coming out of this research

• Against the idea that Auroville is ‘simply’ an utopia
  – Entrenched in material grounds (‘building’ something)
  – Architectural and ecological realizations: the effectiveness of the Aurovilians’s efforts
  – Ability to frame new projets within the project itself

• for the idea that Auroville relies on utopian dynamics
  – Able to continue despite the death of the founder and leader – the Mother
  – The expectations of a supermanhood or overman still constitutes the shared grounds for a collective horizon of meanin
  – Dynamics of utopia:
    – return to the source (textual basis and authority of the words of Aurobindo and Mother)
    – exegesis by authors (Satprem, Van Vrekhem, Lithman) – adaptation of the teachings
‘utopian but not naïve’ (extract)

 Outsiders’ criticisms focus on the tensions in and surrounding Auroville
- Sectarianism (after Elkabbach’s 1973 documentary)
- ‘western-wealthy project’ in a poor india
- The destiny of other so-called ‘similar’ projects is to collapse
- old-fashioned ‘post-hippie’ countercultural mouvement

Coping with problems
- Lucid posture ‘there are problems’ in Auroville (interviews extracts)
- Outsiders
  - Relationship with the world as a whole (ex prevent the excess of touristicification as in other utopian cities like Christiania - Copenhagen)
  - Relationships with local communities and the adjustments needed to match a ‘european dream in a Tamil land’ (jessica namakkal 2012) and cope with violence of the global society
- Emil Cioran’s harsh criticism against ‘utopia-as-alienation’ (the obligation of living in harmony) versus Thomas More’s ideal harmonious city
- self-management and organisation of Auroville seem to result from a waving bewteen the two poles
Back to utopia and beyond

• Finally, to what extent is the concept of utopia relevant here?

• Utopia: ‘beyond’ territory ≠ atopia: ‘without’ territory both references associated with mythology – but Auroville is no Myth, a spiritual project embedded in material according to the wishes of Aurobindo and Mother

• Utopia can be negative (= Caliphate for Daesh) or created after / against the idea of global / surrounding dystopias (‘sanctuary’? Auroville was not founded by default of confidence in the world, like survivalists utopias)

• Foucault’s heterotopia (being here and there in the same time): spatial experience, and as well being connected to Auroville outside the site and in transnational networks of sympathizers or representatives

• And even more than this: a way to collate the material, territorial and symbolic aspects, in a genuine topos and non-topos, a kind of super-topia, then
As a temporary conclusion: from More to Mère

- Auroville considered for itself (singular experience) or as a singular form of a global attempts of humanity to create utopias?
- « what makes an utopia desirable, it’s the fact that it cannot be achieved » (Pironon, 2002) – contradictory with the aim of Auroville?
- Auroville is still standing and alive, and something of an utopia and of another reality – and heterotopia or even a ‘super-topia’
- 50 years : small scale time with reference to history
- Utopia is more than ever a topical and relevant way for humanity to cope with destiny and there is nowadays a huge blossom of utopian communities but for somewhat different reasons
- Why Auroville is standing as an utopia is only the efforts of Aurovilians to put together a certain way to see the future, grounded in a past and heritage, but acting in the present – and therefore to accommodate the retrospective and the projective dimensions of Utopia