A republican’s criticism of patriarchal rule in Henry Neville’s *The Isle of Pines*

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**Abstract**

Henry Neville took an active part in the heated political debates of the period that comprehends the interregnum and the Restoration. During these years, he published a series of pamphlets, from which *The Isle of Pines* (1668) is an example. The text is fundamentally a sarcastic criticism on the principles of patriarchal government, maybe as a response to a work that, during the Restoration, was seen as the official doctrine of monarchical power: Robert Filmer’s *Patriarcha, or the Natural Power of Kings*. *The Isle of Pines* is composed by epistolary testimonies which relate the establishment of an English colony in a paradisiac island in the Indic Ocean, whose population descends from the only survivor of the wreck of a ship that was heading to the Indies, George Pine, and his four women. Power is centred in the figure of the patriarch, who determines certain primary social rules, based on quite superficial readings of the Bible. As time passes, this rudimentary form of government enters a crisis and is on the verge of collapse when the island is rediscovered by a crew of Dutch sailors.

**Keywords**

Republicanism, Utopia, Monarchical government.

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A crítica de um republicano ao governo patriarcal em The Isle of Pines de Henry Neville

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Resumo

Henry Neville participou ativamente dos acalorados debates políticos do período que abarca o interregnum e a Restauração. Ao longo destes anos, publicou uma série de panfletos, de que The Isle of Pines (1668) é um exemplo. Trata-se, fundamentalmente, de uma crítica sarcástica aos princípios do governo patriarcal, talvez como resposta a uma obra que, durante a Restauração, foi vista como a doutrina oficial do poder monárquico: Patriarcha, or the Natural Power of Kings, de Robert Filmer. The Isle of Pines é composta por testemunhos epistolares que relatam o estabelecimento de uma colônia inglesa em uma paradisíaca ilha do Oceano Índico, cuja população descende do único homem sobrevivente do naufrágio de um navio inglês que ia em direção às Índias, George Pine, e de suas quatro mulheres. O poder é centrado na figura do patriarca, que determina certas regras sociais primárias, baseadas em leituras bastante superficiais da Bíblia. Com o passar dos anos, esta forma rudimentar de governo entra em crise e parece estar à beira do colapso quando a ilha é redescoberta por alguns marinheiros holandeses.

Palavras-chave

Republicanismo, utopia, governo monárquico.

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Politics and literary activity were inseparable commitments throughout the life of Henry Neville. Born in the second decade of the 17th Century, Neville witnessed all the major upheavals and turmoils in the political scene of the period, and took an important part in the heated debates and polemics about questions such as the proper form of government and the contemporary situation of England’s foreign affairs, as well as in the political maneuverings as a defender of a kind of republicanism which very much resembles that of James Harrington (Neville being closely related to Harrington's intellectual group). Indeed, his last well known work, *Plato Redivivus* (published in 1681), lies on a fundamental principle of Harrington’s thought: the stability of political power depending on a just and legitimate political representativeness, based on the distribution of landed property. Since the previous century, the gentry and the commoners had been able to acquire considerable portions of land, which led to a reduction on the part owned by the monarch and the nobility. Thus, according to Harrington and Neville, a new form of government must encompass the participation of members from the former classes. As a consequence, and along with this principle, there is a severe critique of patriarchal rule, as we shall see.

*The Isle of Pines* was published in 1668 and can be seen as pertaining to a long series of political pamphlets Neville began to produce in the years preceding the Restoration. As Susan Bruce (1996, p. xxxvi) states, these writings were, in various ways and with various degrees of directness, interventions in the political debates of his time. These debates were highly complex, the basic opposition between monarchism and republicanism being complicated by the fact that there were in the period many different brands of republicanism, as well as by the fact that alliances were frequently formed between factions which might appear at first sight to be anticlerical. […] This complex political and intellectual background often makes these writings produced during the period very difficult to interpret.

Nevertheless how difficult this task might be, the proper manner of reading Neville’s “minor” writings is, in my opinion, to make an attempt at understanding the author’s position and the way he acts in regard to these historical events.

The literary genres called into question when Neville's text is discussed bear this close connection between the fictitious world and the immediate reality. The text was only brought out of a long period of oblivion by the American historian Worthington Chauncey Ford in 1920, and has increasingly been read as a utopia (a dystopia or even a pornotopia), a travel narrative, a political pamphlet or a Restoration satire directed against Charles II. One of its parts has even been seen as a precursor of what later became known as robinsonade.

The narrative is divided into two parts which were actually published separately and only some months later joined together. The first part contains the written account of George Pine, the first settler, who
discovered the island – by chance – after having survived a shipwreck, in the time of the reign of Elizabeth I. Not a proper sailor, he served as an accountant on a ship which had been heading to India, and besides him, only four people could survive: his master’s daughter, two maidservants, and a black slave. He provides some information about the vicissitudes of the trip, how the ship was directed towards the island by a storm and how the group was able to cope with the first difficulties in settling down in the new and unknown land. Much of his account rests on the description of his open sexual experiences with the women in a paradisiacal setting and how they were able to people the island. By the age of 80, shortly before his death, George Pine counted 1,789 descendants from him, his wives and their 47 children. The second part is a contemporary report written by Cornelius Van Sloetten, a Dutch sailor whose ship was also driven onto the island by a storm, making it possible for him to meet Pine’s descendants and get into acquaintance with his story. Van Sloetten’s report accomplishes a literary expedient which many utopian writers make use of, that of framing their narratives with the traveller’s account on how he was able to be in contact with the up-to-now unknown world and its people.

However, it means a lot more than just an expedient. His observations on the present state of things on the island, his long conversations with William Pine, George’s grandson, whose figure much resembles that of a king, and his long excursion through the area, enable the reader to compare two different realities and, thus, judge the consequences of the earlier form of social organization. In fact, we can trace three distinct periods of the Pines colonization in the two major accounts: 1) the arrival of George Pines and the establishment of a barren political community, although heavily based on patriarchal principles; 2) the ascendancy of George’s son, Henry, to the government of the island, instituting a set of laws and establishing a small counsel, a kind of parliamentary representation, composed by “four several persons under him to see [those laws] put in Execution”. Its members were to be chosen from the four tribes living in the place, formed by the descendants of – and named after – George’s four wives; 3) the present moment, when William Pine, made governor, differently from his father, has apparently lost the control over his subjects and does not seem to be capable of restraining some rebellious acts. His is a “fragmented tribal society, fraught with internecine divisions, a society which would be coded quite clearly for a seventeenth-century reader as barbarous” (Bruce, 1996, p. xli).

By focusing our attention on the distinct natures of the three Pines, the consequent developments from one period to another – seen by Stillman (2006, p. 147), respectively, as representations of arcadia, utopia and dystopia –, as well as the relation they maintain with the political background of Neville’s time, we may be able to better understand the author’s political position, the target and depth of his criticism.

There is a strong similarity regarding the circumstances involving George Pines’ life and character and the literary representation of the antediluvian fathers, Adam and Noah. Like Adam, Pines is cast in a place absolutely pleasant and harmless. The island was large enough,
and disjoined and out of sight of any other land, was wholly uninhabited by any people, neither was there any hurtful beast to annoy us. But on the contrary, the country so very pleasant, being always clothed in green, and full of pleasant fruits, and variety of birds, ever warm and never colder than in England in September. [...] And thus, we continued [...] without any disturbance or want (Neville, p. 197).

After some months, he feels free to do whatever he wishes, once the possibility of being rescued and returning home grows more remote day by day. Thus, idleness and plenty of all things required for living a frugal life lead to an intense sexual relationship between Pines and his four women, which is, indeed, the most commented and polemical feature of the whole work. As time passes, “custom taking away shame”, they engage in open sexual practice up to the point when their children begin to understand their behavior. Pines, the patriarch of a now relatively large family, arranges the marriages, deciding who should marry who. He also designates the places where his children must live and determines primary social rules, which are based in some irregular meetings, as well as in a very loosely and superficial, quite literal, reading of the Bible.

Gabe Mahlberg points out that *The Isle of Pines* can be read almost like a fictional adaptation of a work that was seen, during the Restoration, as the official doctrine on monarchical rule: Sir Robert Filmer’s *Patriarcha, or the Natural Power of Kings*. Although the work was published only – and posthumously – in 1680, it is very possible that it circulated previously in manuscript, since, according to scholars, it was written around 1630. Neville might have given both a literary treatment and a literal interpretation of some of Filmer’s most widespread principles, which helps to add a satirical tone to the work. Mahlberg (2009, p. 86-7) states that Filmer not only saw kings as God’s representatives on earth and fathers to their people, but – based on a literal reading of the Bible – his Patriarcha also fused ideas about the origins of government and political obligation. Filmer derived the origins of government from Adam, who, as the first father of the first family, also became the first king and passed on his God-given monarchy through primogeniture to his eldest son and through him to all subsequent generations. This account of hereditary succession from Adam is associated with divine right, primogeniture, and hierarchies of birth. It implies that both children and subjects were by nature under the authority of their father and monarch, and therefore unfree.

At this point, we touch on a crucial topic of Neville’s thought: the problem of civil and political liberty, something that goes along with his idea of a shared-consensual power based on the distribution of land property, and whose meaning generates a striking opposition in regard to Filmer, who opens his treatise by criticizing a statement the author of *The Isle* would have certainly agreed with: “Mankind is naturally endowed and born with freedom from all subjection, and at liberty to choose what form of government it please, and that the power which any one man hath over others was at first bestowed according to the discretion of the multitude” (Filmer, 1991, p. 2).
As a republican thinker, an enthusiast of the Venetian form of government and a devoted reader and probably translator of Machiavel, Neville obviously defended the idea that society must be governed rather by merit than birth. If something of this sort can be observed in *The Isle*, it is in the brief report given by William Pines about his father’s government, the only tract of the work that we could certainly call utopian. Henry Pines (it has already been suggested there is something biographical in the character of George’s son) succeeds in putting down riots and uprisings which began to happen immediately after his father’s death, by establishing a minimal set of laws – mostly based in Mosaic rule – and a small counsel, by which he was able to govern the island, until his death, without any major threats to the well-being of the community. The presence of a small, proto or parliamentary-like representative group, formed by members chosen for their political skills or whatever motive other than ascendance, implicitly relates to Neville’s defense of a co-ordinate government, or, to put it in other words, to a rereading of the classical theory of the mixed form of government, which had in Neville’s time its paradigm in the myth of Venice. In fact, Neville himself made use of the image of Venice as a universal model in questions concerning the best form of government in his *Plato Redivivus*, by giving voice to a noble Venetian who helps two Englishmen in search of solutions to the problems presented. The idea of a shared legislative authority among the rule of the one (be it the doge or the king), the few and the many, is a constant theme in Neville’s writings, and it is indeed a complex one, since the degree of power the author attributes to the monarch varies with the years and mostly according to the political turnarounds of the period\(^1\).

Although only superficially hinted at in *The Isle*, as said above – and a possible allusion to a period preceding the Restoration, when parliament enjoyed real co-legislator status and decision power – the shared government represented by Henry Pines and his counselors was able to guarantee a considerable period of peacefulness and security, by the establishment and maintenance of a code of laws, made necessary to control and correct the anarchic impulses of a now numerous community that, “lacking the practices and preconditions for an ordered political life, […] decline into sin, illicit sex, rape, and violence” (Stillman, 2006, 147). According to the narrator, but as it is impossible, but that in multitudes disorders will grow, the stronger seeking to oppress the weaker, no tie of religion being strong enough to chain up the depraved nature of mankind, even so amongst them mischiefs began to rise, and they soon fell from those good orders prescribed them by my grandfather. The source from whence those mischiefs spring, was at first, I conceive, the neglect of hearing the Bible read […], but now many of them wandering far up into the country, they quite neglected the coming to it, with all other means of Christian instruction, whereby the sense of sin being quite lost in them, they fell to whoredoms, incests, and adulteries, so that what my grandfather was forced to do for necessity, they did for wantonness (Neville, 1996, p. 201).

As we can observe, the disorders of the multitude are heavily concerned with images of sexual depravity. This is an artifice highly used by the author, mostly present in his pamphleteering activity, to represent political and moral corruption, being more than a question circumscribed to the field of the gender studies, which have, for the most part, underestimated the immediate political context of such representations.

Corruption, disorder, depravity are moral consequences of a series of actions – political or individual – based on patriarchal principles: in Neville’s story, these social abnormalities threaten to completely get out of control after George’s death, and again during the Dutch stay on the island, as a sign that the government of William – which, in a certain sense, revives that of his grandfather for his inertia and absence of political will – is a failure (if it is a government at all, a clear allusion to the reign of Charles II); in Neville’s time – and the way his intellectual group sees it – social and economic transformations which England endured in the last decades claimed for an analogous political change, not the restoration of an outworn and improper form of government, which could only bring forth incongruous circumstances regarding the new state of things. It appears evident from these considerations, and the fragment quoted above, that Neville considers that moral behavior is the result of a political process. Thereof, the necessity of proper laws. Mahlberg (2009, p. 6) argues that Neville, as well as Harrington, were more pessimistic about the individual’s capability for virtue and self-rule [we can call to mind William Pines’ assertion on the “depraved nature of mankind”] and made stability and instability dependent on other factors. […] The corruption of the people was “the consequence rather than the cause of political instability. As Neville put it, “political defects breed moral ones”. Therefore, the form of government and its laws and institutions had to be set right.

Thus, if in a first moment, with George Pines’ letter, we can observe the self-centered individual will in the act of developing a lawless and politically barren community almost to the point of its collapse, William’s account of his father’s reign can be seen as a contrasting image. It is the report of a brief, yet a fruitful, period of the Pines’ domination on the island. In this sense, some of its contents hint at the period after the Civil War, but fundamentally, it is possible to agree with Mahlberg that the idea of a cooperative effort in the government – which will be central to the discussions in *Plato redivivus* – acquired a broader dimension in Neville’s thought after the Restoration. As the only properly utopian passage of the work, it shares with other utopian writings – at least to the positive utopia – a key-point, which is the control of the individual will for the benefit of the collective whole. There’s a suggestion that the aim is to give form to a unified community, in which the aspirations of its members converge in the achievement of a collective purpose. There are rudiments of an urban experience, and the attempt, although minimal, to organize the political community substitutes, for the first time (and the only one), the many passions of an idiosyncratic personality.
Nevertheless, Henry’s successor seems to fail in following his father’s path and in guaranteeing the control over the island through an effective law system and political participation. His reign begins to be seriously threatened by an insurrection from one of the tribes, and he is forced to appeal to the support of the Dutch, who, technologically and tactically superior to those settlers from Elizabeth’s time, are able to easily suppress the rebellion, by the use of gunpowder.

The islanders’ return to a previous phase of their colonization proves to be dangerous both to their internal problems (social structure) and to their future – and now unavoidable – foreign affairs².

**Bibliographical references**


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²This text is the result of the first readings for a project of commented translations and introductory studies of English utopias published during the period of the Civil Wars and the Restoration.