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## IMAGINARIES OF THE FUTURE 02: POLITICS, POETICS, PLACE

# Further Reflections on Being a Utopian in These Times

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In this essay (a revision of my contribution at the closing session of the Imaginaries of the Future Leverhulme Network held in London in September 2017), I offer a situated commentary (by 'me') on 'ourselves' (and I know that category has to be deconstructed, complicated, exploded, erased, and yet retained) as *utopians* and on the work 'we' do, and can do (for this was a *utopian* conference). I begin with a reflection on the current mobilization of the term dystopia as a signifier for our times, and as I do so I offer a counterpoint to the ideological appropriation of dystopia by way of my own argument in *Scraps of the Untainted Sky* (Westview 2000) for the militant pessimism of the critical dystopia. I then comment on several interrelated matters: the role of the utopian as scholar and as intellectual; the context and import of our work, in the academy and in the world; the utopian problematic (in its inclusion of the utopian object of study and utopia as method); and the necessity, indeed urgency, of 'our' work in these critical times. My aim is tease out the utopian surplus within the utopian formation.

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What is the source of our first suffering?  
 It lies in the fact that we hesitated to speak.  
 It was born in the moment  
 when we accumulated silent things within us.

– Gaston Bachelard, *Water and Dreams*

It's not yet the worst of times, but things are worse every day. It's certainly not the best of times. The inter-related crises that have been with us for a good while now are getting more pervasive. Ecologically, the globe is in dire straits. Economically, wealth and power flow to a privileged few nations, classes, and individuals as exploitation and immiseration spread and deepen around the world. From the intensification of war, disease, and starvation to the normalization of alienated, enslaved, and precarious work, the quality of daily existence diminishes. And in recent years, racism and xenophobia have become so dominant that new regimes and politicians steadily gain ground as they rise from the fetid swamp of hatred.<sup>1</sup>

Across media platforms, this dark situation has been repeatedly characterised as 'dystopian' (with references to George Orwell and Margaret Atwood abounding). And yet, too often I fear that the common sense echoing of this characterisation produces a 'moral panic' that feeds a resigned, anti-utopian pessimism rather than provoking the prophetic awakening of which dystopian narrative is capable.<sup>2</sup> If we are indeed

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<sup>1</sup> This essay grew from my presentation at the closing session of the Leverhulme 'Imaginarities of the Future' Research Network, held at Chelsea College of Arts in September 2017. I am grateful to Nathaniel Coleman, the Principal Investigator of the Leverhulme Project, and to Dan Smith, the local host of the London meeting, for facilitating such an engaged and nurturing setting and programme for this network of utopian scholars, artists, and activists. My presentation was prompted by the deep dissatisfaction, indeed alienation, that I (and others) feel about the changing nature of research culture and practice in contemporary scholarship, as they have been contained and redirected by rationalizing managerial practices driven by global neoliberal hegemony. It's not that good scholarship doesn't occur *within* the university; but (especially in the last decade or so) that engaged 'intellectual' work has been carried out in spite of, against the grain of, an 'academic' neoliberal regime that drives disciplinary mechanisms inducing forced choices channeled by the pressures of labour precarity and careerist respectability. I thank Kathleen Eull and Katie Moylan for their comments on earlier drafts of this paper; and I am grateful to Kathleen Eull for her suggestion of the Bachelard quote.

<sup>2</sup> For a text indicative of this resigned tendency, see Jill Lepore's 'A Golden Age for Dystopian Fiction'. Lepore's treatment is replete with binaries in which *dystopia* becomes no more than the bleak opposite of *utopia* (while never acknowledging that this simplified account places dystopia firmly and

already living in this 'concrete dystopia' (as Maria Varsam has put it), then certainly it's time to exercise what Rebecca Solnit describes as 'hope in the dark'.<sup>3</sup> It's time to choose to work from the standpoint of militant, utopian pessimism that is expressed in critical dystopian narratives. It's time for the exercise of the insurgent hope of the utopian impulse.<sup>4</sup>

What, then, are 'we', as utopians, in all our diversity, to do? This is an existential and a political question; but let me begin with our professional work as utopian studies scholars. I do so to highlight the exemplary record of the way our colleagues have rigorously identified and explored the objects of study that constitute the *utopian*. Whether investigating texts, communities, and movements, or philosophical

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one-dimensionally in the position of the anti-utopian persuasion). Influenced by academic studies of dystopia that tend to reduce this living cultural form to the status of an abstraction/generalization adduced from an ahistorical taxonomy, Lepore evacuates the nuanced hermeneutic approach to actually existing (historically, politically, formally) dystopian expressions as it has developed within critical utopian studies over the last few decades. She therefore avoids any discussion of ways in which the dystopian form is subject to historical contingencies (as is any aesthetic form, as for example the 'critical utopias'). Hence, she erases the shifting form and political stance of dystopian writing in broad generalized brushstrokes and ignores the innovative expression of the 'critical dystopias' (e.g., work by Octavia Butler or Marge Piercy) as well as the critical studies of the genre prompted by that literary development. Therefore, I would argue that her article becomes part of the popular apparatus of cultural de-legitimation operating within the increasingly corporate/managerial academic sphere, as it aligns itself more and more with preserving and extending the current status quo.

<sup>3</sup> The term 'concrete dystopia' was coined by Maria Varsam: see 'Concrete Dystopia: Slavery and its Others in *Dark Horizons*. As a counterpoint to the tendency evinced in Jill Lepore's *New Yorker* article, Solnit's *Hope* is an eloquent recognition of the robust emotional and political category of hope in dark times. Her book traces the history of activism and social change over the past five decades, reviving an oppositional memory of movements that, while ultimately defeated, bespoke effective challenges to existing power. Solnit consequently offers these historical accounts as parables that can inspire political engagement and help light our way through these current times of 'Trouble' (as Donna Haraway puts it). Hope, for Solnit, faces the dark realities and works against and through them. Hope is intricately linked with activism; for as she puts it 'Hope calls for action; action is impossible without hope (Solnit, 2016: 4).

<sup>4</sup> Here, I want to recall two critical dystopian micro-texts that have always inspired me. First, Alfred Hayes's iconic song 'I Dreamed I Saw Joe Hill', commemorating International Workers of the World (IWW) activist and songwriter Joe Hill who was charged with murder and executed in Utah in 1915. While not accurately his last words, Hayes's lyrics capture the sense of a telegram sent to Hill's IWW comrade Bill Haywood shortly before his death: 'Goodbye, Bill, I die like a true blue rebel. Don't waste any time mourning. Organize!'. And second, Leonard Cohen's 'Anthem', with its succinct articulation of how stubborn utopian hope can grow out of the darkest times: 'There is a crack, a crack in everything. That's how the light gets in'.

and theoretical approaches, this archival, bibliographic, ethnographic, genealogical, and historical research has made available a body of work that affirms the existence and value of the *utopian* – thus countering ideological attacks on utopianism and generating a growing body of work for study and commentary. Here, as the first of four texts underlying my comments in this essay, Lyman Tower Sargent's 'The Three Faces of Utopianism Revisited' stands as a milestone in charting this tradition of empirical research in the realms of textualities, lived practices, and theoretical interventions.

However, like many intellectual projects, our scholarship does not take place in isolation but rather within the organizational framework of our collegial societies (here in Europe, in North America, and hopefully soon in Latin America); our journal of record and several book series; and gatherings such as the annual meetings of the Society for Utopian Studies (North America), the Utopian Studies Society (Europe), and more occasional meetings such as those organised by the Leverhulme Imaginaries of the Future Research Network. It is in this *collective* context that many of us begin to appreciate the crucial difference between the scholasticism found in many academic circles and the scholarship that is undertaken in utopian studies; for in our exchanges, we aim to enact a quality which is itself *utopian* – a better way of being in the world.

This brings me to my second text: Naomi Jacobs's 'Utopia and the Beloved Community' (which was her essay in the Ralahine Utopian Studies volume, *Utopia Method Vision*, for which contributors were asked to reflect on the ways that utopianism has shaped their work and lives). Jacobs writes of her personal recognition of the social efficacy she discovered in the Society for Utopian Studies came to constitute her 'scholarly home' (Jacobs, 2007: 227). Borrowing her title from the American civil rights movement, which described that gathering 'of those dedicated to justice and peace', she admits that this nomination may be too much to claim for a scholarly undertaking; and yet she argues that more than many such projects 'utopian studies seems shaped by the conviction that "one's work, indeed one's life [in the words of Josiah Royce], means nothing, either theoretically or practically unless I am a member of a community"' (Jacobs, 2007: 227). She then identifies the *political* qualities of utopian studies embedded in:

The ethos sustained by the founders...many of whom came out of Left politics of the 1960s and 1970s. Unlike many...organizations, utopian studies has been from its inception an enterprise of friends. It has been informed by a desire to connect the world of scholarship with the world of politics, and to do so in a way that embodies egalitarian ideals...this has been true not only in the content of that work, but in the manner in which it is conducted as a social – and sociable – enterprise (Jacobs, 2007: 227–228).

Now, some might disagree with Jacobs's description. However, I know that many would concur. Having said this, let me assure you that in making these comments I'm *not* calling for an overt *politicization* of our societies in North America or Europe; for such a rigid and instrumental call would risk shutting down our rigorous and generous work. What I *am* calling for is a consideration by each of us of the existential and political *consequence* of our work, as we carry it out both within the 'safe spaces' of our meetings and in the public sphere.

By saying this, I am shifting registers so as to reflect not only on who 'we' are as scholars, but as *intellectuals*. Necessary as our scholarship is, I believe it is not sufficient if the utopian *project* is to move beyond the university sphere and into the world as an active force for change. In this regard (again respecting our diverse subjectivities), our vocation as *utopian intellectuals* asks us to direct our expertise and creativity not only to understanding the world, but, in the spirit of Marx's 11<sup>th</sup> Thesis, to work together in intersectional solidarity to changing it for the better.

Central to our work, therefore, is not only research on utopian *objects* but also, and more so, our engagement with utopia as *method* – as we deploy what Fredric Jameson has termed the 'utopian problematic' not only to elucidate utopian texts, communities, and theories, but also to help develop actual utopian alternatives.<sup>5</sup> In the spirit of Sartre's 'engaged intellectual', we can tear open the sutured reality that secures the rule of the world among its docile subjects in order to expose its

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<sup>5</sup> Jameson describes the 'utopian problematic' as 'not a set of propositions about reality, but a set of categories in terms of which reality is analyzed and interrogated, and a set of "essentially contested" categories at that' (Jameson, 1983: 283).

contradictions and cruelties and to trace the tendencies and latencies of emerging possibilities opening toward progressive transformation. Whether we bring our intellectual capacities to bear on projects of cultural critique, policy development, community organization, artistic and design production, or radical pedagogy, we do *more*, or other, than scholarship as we contribute to (re)building, not reforming, the world as utopians.

Jameson has long reminded us that the utopian imagination has atrophied under the co-opting mechanisms of capitalism – increasingly debilitated in recent times by the twin disciplinary forces of a neoliberal regime that reduces everything to the counterfeit utopia of entrepreneurial success and an anti-utopian pragmatism that disempowers radical action by conflating the utopian with the totalitarian. Prompted by the crises that engulf us, however, the need for the rehabilitation of our utopian musculature is greater than ever. To be sure, there is a long tradition of advancing utopianism as a vehicle for radical change. Roots of it are in Thomas More's *Utopia* and in plans and visions of utopians ever since; but, in our time, the interventions by the likes of Ernst Bloch and Karl Mannheim have been foundational; and this is carried on by many others, notably within the frameworks of anarchism, feminism, Marxism, and ecological and postcolonial thought. However, it is the recent work of Ruth Levitas that has especially sharpened our understanding of utopia as *method*.

Therefore, my third text is the first chapter of Levitas's *Utopia as Method*, 'From Terror to Grace'. In this opening section, Levitas describes the utopian impulse as 'an anthropological given that underpins the human propensity to long for and imagine a life otherwise', a material desire that lies in 'hunger, loss, and lack' (Levitas, 2013: 5). Crucially, this desire is only effective when it takes the form of an 'educated' hope (Bloch's *docta spes*) as it embraces the 'prefiguration of wholeness or a better way of being' (Levitas, 2013: 5).

From this definitional base, Levitas confronts three impediments to the realization of utopian agency. She begins by marking the *anti-utopian* tendency of dominant discourse and politics as they suppress utopian vision and method (locating the roots of its contemporary manifestation in work from Friedrich Hayek to Hannah Arendt). She then clears this anti-utopian blockage as she *reclaims* utopia's engagement with what

it means to be *human* at the ontological level of our existential quest 'to understand who we are, why we are here and how we connect with each other' (Levitas, 2013: 12). Working from a post-secular sensibility, she evokes a *materialist spirituality* that understands the redemptive capacity of the utopian impulse to overcome alienation by way of our reach for *Heimat*, the not yet fulfilled 'home' for which we yearn.<sup>6</sup> She therefore identifies *utopian hope* as a form of a secular grace that enables 'connection, acceptance, reconciliation, wholeness' (Levitas, 2013: 13). This lived quality makes possible the capacity to supersede empirical scholarship by means of an interpretive, hermeneutic, utopian epistemology that enables us to articulate not only the denial of human fulfilment but also the possibilities for realizing it.

At this point, Levitas challenges the second impediment to utopian efficacy. Recognizing the capacity of the arts to ask 'an unequivocally utopian question' that conjures 'longing and anticipated fulfilment', she acknowledges this aesthetic encounter even as she identifies the way in which it can sequester utopian energies within its own domain (Levitas, 2013: 15). She argues that the fear of totalitarianism, with its denial of totality and loss of faith in political agency, channels the utopian impulse into this cultural enclosure, thus reducing if not entirely silencing its political force.

Thus: a utopianism restricted to the aesthetic can 'distract us from the suffering surrounding us in the real world, rather than move us to change that, or recognize our own role in its reproduction' (Levitas, 2013: 16). Here, I'll add that this process of sequesterization can now be recognized in the instrumental scholasticism being imposed on contemporary academic life, as it reduces intellectual and scholarly work to the disciplinary strictures of a managerial university system that rewards applied work directed at furthering the present system rather than that which is critical and transformative. For if utopia remains opportunistically a *domesticated* object or tool confined to this neoliberal present, its capacity for transformation will be locked within confines that are as limiting as those of the aesthetic realm.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> For a good account of the nature and impact of 'material of spirituality', see Kovel.

<sup>7</sup> For a good account of this 'domestication' of utopia, see Webb.



Having cleared this second blockage, Levitas steps into an *open field* in which the utopian 'aspiration for a transformed existence moves out of the realm of culture [and I would add academia] through the formation of *political* subjects and agents' (Levitas, 2013: 16). Consequently, the utopian hermeneutic, previously restricted to aesthetics, is released to address the 'social, economic and institutional basis of human happiness, human well-being, or even human survival' in a holistic and structural approach (Levitas, 2013: 16). By superseding the twin strictures of modernist aesthetics and postmodern theorizing, Levitas releases utopia's 'real power to transform the given, social world' (Levitas, 2013: 17). Here, of course, she is not engaging in what anti-utopian sceptics too often label as a promiscuous discovery of 'utopia' everywhere; rather, she is valorizing the interpretive capacity to think about social and cultural reality in order to tease out the traces, or *spüren*, of utopian possibilities that inform radical transformation.

From this political standpoint, Levitas takes on her third anti-utopian impediment: namely, the disillusionment *within* the utopian realm as it grows out of the conceptual and political failure 'to recognize the necessary provisionality of utopian projections', thus leading to a disempowering misapprehension of utopian articulations and actions as rigid and authoritarian that is then accompanied by a reapplication of utopian discourse to the legitimating mechanisms of the present regime (Levitas, 2013: 18). Of course, this internal refusal of utopia's critical and anticipatory capacities has its roots in the earlier blockages of anti-communist suppression and aesthetic enclosure, but it is all the more harmful by coming from within the utopian tendency. As such, it functions as a form of intellectual disarmament that unleashes cynicism or capitulation, or both, in the face of utopia's transformative capacity. There is, in short, no worse enemy than the enemy within – and no worse impediment to the utopian impulse that produced by its ostensible adherents. Refusing this disillusionment and co-optation, Levitas reasserts the utopian as radical method. She therefore makes her final, and crucial, contribution by ratifying utopia's power as a *diagnostic* hermeneutic but then *equally* insisting on utopia's function of generating the historical break and *constructive* change that aims explicitly at the 'instauration of concrete utopia' (Levitas, 2013: 15).

Levitas's unpacking of the impediments that block the utopian method is crucially important for our work as utopian intellectuals. On one hand, she breaks through the bars that imprison the utopian impulse and, on the other, she invokes the interpretive and constructivist modes of the utopian method. Re-reading Levitas's chapter for this piece, I couldn't help but think of Noam Chomsky's 1967 essay, 'The Responsibility of Intellectuals', in which he challenges intellectuals to engage critically with the immorality and illegality of the US War in Vietnam.<sup>8</sup> In words that resonate with Levitas's sense of the utopian project, Chomsky asserts that '[i]t is the responsibility of intellectuals to speak the truth, and to expose lies' (Chomsky, 1968: 258).

Indeed, Chomsky's closing words are apt for us today as we consider our own vocations as utopians: 'The question "What have I done?" is one that we may well ask ourselves, as we read, each day, of fresh atrocities in Vietnam – as we create, or mouth, or tolerate the deceptions that will be used to justify the next defense of freedom' (Chomsky, 1968: 291). To be sure, this call for responsible engagement extends to the entire citizenry; for we know that the facility of the utopian method is available to all who seek to crush what Chomsky called 'the current apocalyptic translation of reality' and to create a very different sort of world. However, my reflection here is especially for those of us who are self-consciously *utopian*. Our task, *especially* as intellectuals, and as teachers and organizers, is to make the processes of the utopian method more accessible to the wider public and thus to engage in the political activity of the public sphere not only to negate what exists but to contribute to the steps necessary for producing a better world.

I can think of no better words to end my comments than those from my last text, Lyman Tower Sargent's 'Choosing Utopia: Utopianism as an Essential Element in Political Thought and Action':

Thus, we must choose Utopia. We must choose the belief that the world can be radically improved; we must dream socially; and we must allow our social dreams to affect our lives. The choice for utopia is a choice that the world can be radically improved (Sargent, 2007: 306).

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<sup>8</sup> Chomsky's essay first appeared in *The New York Review of Books* (23 February 1967), then published in book form in *The Dissenting Academy* in 1968.

## Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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