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IMAGINARIES OF THE FUTURE 02: POLITICS, POETICS, PLACE

A Utopic Method for English Place-Shaping Visions

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It has long been accepted practice that plans and strategies for the management of change in communities should be shaped around a 'vision' of the future of the place. Indeed, in England from 2000 to 2015 such practice was a requirement for statutory community strategies and development plans. Some academics have, however, questioned the practice as being poorly defined, and lacking a theoretical basis or evidence of efficacy. Government-sponsored studies of English practice have confirmed that the meaning of 'vision' in this context, and its intended purpose, are poorly understood. Drawing on the historical relationship between utopian practice and town planning, this article identifies from literature relating to utopian studies, framed within Henri Lefebvre's dialectical and experimental form of utopianism, a cyclical utopic method that could be applied to place-shaping practice. The Lefebvrian method focuses on a purpose for visions that is more about social learning and consensus building as outcomes of the vision process – similar to the role of utopias in the 'education of desire' – rather than implementing a vision as if it were a blueprint. This article moves towards addressing these criticisms, identifying utopianism as a source of a potential theoretical understanding of the use of visions in place-shaping. It also serves to provide a practical context within which to test the idea of an experimental and dialectical (Lefebvrian) form of utopianism.

Introduction

Plans or strategies to manage change in, or the development of, places are frequently shaped around a 'vision' – a statement which describes the intended future for the place. From 2000 to 2015, local government in England was required by law to enter into partnerships with public, private and voluntary sector agencies to produce a strategy to promote the social, economic and environmental well-being of the area, and then to collaborate on delivering the objectives of that strategy. Critically, the strategy was required to be constructed around a 'long-term vision' for the future of the place, devised and signed up to by the whole partnership (Department for Environment, Transport and the Regions, 2000), although it was not made clear what form such a vision should take, or even whether or how visions were expected to be effective. At around the same time that these requirements were put in place in England, the Canadian academic, Robert Shipley, led some research that began to question the validity of using visions for local planning (see Shipley, 2000; Shipley and Newkirk, 1999; Shipley, 2002; Shipley and Michela, 2006), claiming that there was a lack of a common frame of reference around what visions were and what they were meant to achieve, a lack of evidence of their success, and a lack of a theoretical basis for their use.

The academic field of utopian studies, with its recent methodological focus (e.g. Levitas, 2013; Moylan and Baccolini, 2007), offers considerable potential to explain what visions should be and how they should work, because the methodological characteristics of utopian thinking about the future of places have parallels with the ways in which town planners and community strategists also think about the future of places. This is a situation that undoubtedly has its roots in the historical relationship between utopianism and the development of town planning, and applies also to place-shaping as a result of its intimate relationship with the latter. In particular, the experimental and dialectical form of utopianism described by Henri Lefebvre is applicable to issues of town planning (Lefebvre, 2000; Coleman, 2005; Coleman, 2013). Through an analysis of the literature, this paper sets out how Lefebvrian utopianism applied 'as method' could provide the framework for a theory that explains the use and function of visions in a planning or place-shaping context.

The Relevance of Utopianism to Place-Shaping Practice

There are now so many works that make the case for the positive value of utopian thinking in general (e.g. Ashcroft, 2012; Levitas, 2013; Moylan, 2006; Pohl, 2009; Sargent, 2006), and in relation to place-shaping in particular (e.g. Hatuka and D'Hooghe, 2007; Pinder, 2002; Cole, 2001) that the general case does not need to be rehearsed here. However, it is worth positioning this research within the field of utopian studies, given its 'eclectic' nature (Goodwin, 2001: 1).

The current research follows the view that utopian scholarship is about understanding how and why people think about alternative societies, and that – derived from the 'good place/not place' pun within Thomas More's work – utopia is the quest for a good place that does not currently exist (Stillman, 2001). In terms of Lyman Tower Sargent's 'three faces of utopianism' (Sargent, 1994), town planning and place-shaping can be said to form part of 'utopian practice' (Sargent, 2010: 6–7), alongside intentional communities, very much informed by utopianism's other literary and social theory faces: practical utopianism is, like planning and place-shaping, about 'making better places' (Healey, 2010).

Learning from experience in the 20th century, both town planners and utopians have developed perspectives on their work that eschew the top-down imposition of solutions in favour of the building of consensus through experimentation and dialogue. Explorations of the borders between planning and utopianism in this regard are perhaps best exemplified by the independent works of the Marxist sociologist and philosopher Henri Lefebvre (e.g. Lefebvre, 2000; Kofman and Lebas, 1996; Coleman, 2013) and the architect-planner Yona Friedman (2000). Both demonstrated that practical utopianism should be about creating places in which everyday life can be shown to be improved, and that these should be defined and achieved iteratively through building consensus, discussion and experimentation, rather than comprehensive revolution: reaching agreement about the nature of a utopia to be implemented wholesale can be a permanent block upon achieving such a revolution.

Both also suggested that for utopia to be realised, it must be *possible*, even if not immediately so within current resources: at least the first step towards implementing that utopia should be achievable in the short-term. In other words, utopia cannot

be fantasy: it cannot rely upon technology that does not (yet) exist or impossible demands upon human nature. Conversely, utopia should be aspirational: it should drive the society or community to a different level in some way: a utopian plan cannot, by definition, be conservative.

In the current research, utopian action is defined with reference to the nature of the action, rather than the nature of the outcomes sought. The wealth of literature on utopianism and utopian studies has a strong tendency to focus on 'utopian expression' (Moylan, 2006: 3) – the characteristics of particular utopias, the value or quality of the works in which they are represented and the factors that influenced their authors – rather than drawing out or defining the characteristics of the means through which a utopia has been constructed and conveyed. The same can be said even of Ruth Levitas' inspirational work *Utopia as Method*. In the final chapter, explicitly intended to give substance to the mode of utopianism concerned with 'the imagination of potential alternative scenarios for the future' (2013: 153), significant attention is given not to the methodology associated with this practice, but to the outcomes Levitas feels it should seek: human flourishing, dignity, equality, income, employment, care and sustainability. Yet these outcomes – desirable as they are – are presented as the necessary and definitive consequences of utopian thought, without consideration of how these principles have necessarily been arrived at or even whether a utopian method should see a role for a society to determine, for itself, the principles by which it wishes to live, which may be different.

Utopian studies as an academic field is not altogether consistent in its use of terminology. For clarity, in this paper:

- 'utopia' denotes a particular imaginary or projected society, and the concept in general;
- 'utopianism' refers to the belief in utopia as a critical and/or transformative process;
- 'utopic' describes the methods employed in utopianism, to distinguish this from 'utopian' beliefs or principles; and
- a 'utopism' is the medium within which a particular utopia is expressed.

The English Place-Shaping System

The activity that this research is investigating is referred to here as 'place-shaping'. This is a term coined by Sir Michael Lyons, then head of Birmingham University's Institute of Local Government Studies, as part of his review of the funding and function of local government. 'Place-shaping' is intended to convey what it is that councils are supposed to do, defined as 'the creative use of powers and influence to promote the general well-being of a community and its citizens' (Lyons, 2007: 3). The term 'place-shaping' was not coined and codified until 2007, but is applied retrospectively here because it describes how many councils have been working for decades, and particularly the ways in which councils were mandated to work under the Local Government Act 2000. Place-shaping has a wider remit than town planning, but is intimately related to it: place-shaping sets the agenda for change in a community, and town planning manages only the use and development of land in the context of that agenda. Similarly there are separate regimes which manage other resources, hence place-shaping is an integrating and co-ordinating activity.

Section 4 of the Local Government Act 2000 placed a duty on English councils to prepare a strategy for 'promoting or improving the economic, social and environmental well-being of their area and contributing to the achievement of sustainable development' (Great Britain, 2000). This so-called sustainable community strategy (SCS) would be prepared through a partnership of public, private and voluntary sector agencies operating in the area. This status of the strategy became described as the 'plan of plans' for an area (e.g. Darlow et al., 2007: 118; Morphet, 2011: 22) with which other plans, decisions and activities by all stakeholders would generally be expected to conform. As a place-shaping strategy, the SCS was prepared and operated outside the town planning system, but often the work was undertaken by planning officers, and local planning policies and decisions were required to have regard to it. The SCS was required to have at its heart a 'long-term vision' for the future of the place (DETR, 2000: 6).

This whole approach was proposed as a solution to the problem of 'the congested state' (Skelcher, 2000), in which services traditionally provided by the public sector were increasingly provided by private and voluntary organisations, often competing

with and duplicating each other with little coordination, and almost impossible to navigate by their intended customers or users. In parallel with the introduction of place-shaping and SCSs, the town planning profession in England was promoting a new paradigm for planning – ‘spatial planning’ – which was intended to help address some of the same issues by taking a similar integrating approach to address the congested state by going beyond traditional land-use planning into collaborative visioning (Haughton et al., 2010). In the mid-2000s this idea of spatial planning was drawn into English planning policy, on paper at least, but in practice planning activity was mandated merely as the land-use development expression of the SCS (Clifford, 2012; Morphet et al., 2007).

As part of its drive to reduce burdens on councils, the Government repealed the duty to prepare an SCS in 2015, but the promotion of visions as a means to shape the future of a place remains for particular functions, including town planning.

Visions and Place-Shaping

The word ‘vision’ has many meanings, technical and colloquial, pejorative and laudatory. This range is one of the reasons why its use in place-shaping has been identified as problematic. Robert Shipley considered that as far as those engaged in planning and local governance were concerned ‘the definition of vision is implicit and ... the practice of visioning is good, effective and progressive ... without ever having examined the concepts critically’ (Shipley, 2000: 226). Government-sponsored research into practice in the first three years of the SCS approach found that it was difficult to analyse the content of place-shaping strategies because terms such as vision, objective, mission, goal, etc. ‘are used in an interchangeable fashion ... without any common reference framework’ (Entec, 2003: 10), and yet made no recommendations as to how this could be resolved. Part of the problem was that when the Government introduced its place-shaping agenda through the Local Government Act 2000, it failed to adequately explain in policy or guidance what it intended that visions were expected to achieve.

Explicit definitions of what a vision is in place-shaping were non-existent in government guidance, but, rarely, other commentators have attempted to fill the

void, although such definitions are usually quite broad: '[an] imaginative perception of how things could be in the future' (Cowan, 2005: 441) or 'a statement of a desired or even idealized future state and/or the image or picture of that goal' (Shipley and Michela, 2006: 224). Government's failure to define or explain the form or purpose of place-shaping visions in policy or guidance resulted in stakeholders involved in the process applying their own preconceptions. The result was usually the production of a short and generic written description of what the place was intended to be like in the future, with subsequent plans and strategies produced with the intention of realising the vision as if it were a blueprint (Entec, 2003). This seductively simple paradigm does not, however, stand up to examination: actions taken by the council or its partners following the creation of a vision frequently do not result in direct implementation of the vision, because there was little compulsion to do so. In fact, the only activity required by law to have regard to the SCS, and hence its place-shaping vision, was the highly-regulated preparation of development plans (Stewart, 2003). Even here, the provisions of the SCS would need to be balanced with other considerations that may indicate a different outcome. The continued popularity of place-shaping visions, despite limited evidence of direct steps being taken to ensure their implementation, would seem to suggest that their true purpose is something other than enabling the delivery of a blueprint. If a place-shaping vision is not meant to be a blueprint, then what are visions for? And is there a theory that can help explain their use?

Theories of network governance suggest that the English place-shaping system – in which a community strategy is agreed by the partners, and the council has a role in co-ordinating the strategy's production and implementation – is a form of meta-governance (Stewart, 2003; Chhotray and Stoker, 2009). In effect, the partners agree that they are all working towards common goals – a bigger picture or a greater truth – and they similarly agree that one partner (the council) can take steps to enforce progress towards those agreed goals.

The few powers that councils have in this regard rely either on transactional agreements between partners or on some form of statutory regulatory regime, including planning. However, agreements are voluntary to enter into and regulation

can only manage activities that individuals or organisations wish to undertake. It is therefore necessary for councils and their partners to create a context within which they, and other stakeholders, may be motivated to act in concert to achieve shared goals.

One potentially helpful tool for achieving this is 'storytelling' (Sørensen, 2006): the creation of a compelling narrative that not only describes the goals, but also the story of how those goals could be achieved, and this, theoretically at least, motivates partners to work towards the same ends – which appears to be the commonly accepted understanding of the role of visions in English place-shaping. Studies have shown that in fact the story (or vision) itself does no such thing – or is not, at least, the most important element (Shiple and Michela, 2006). What really inspires different actors to work together to the same ends is the process of creating the vision or story together, one in which the different actors learn more about each other's aspirations and priorities and negotiate ways to cooperate (or at least avoid conflict).

There are parallels between this conceptualisation and the utopian idea of the 'education of desire', in which the need for change, the capability of change and the means of change may be promoted in order to build support for a proposed utopia. The expression is derived from the French philosopher Miguel Abensour's description of William Morris propagandizing Marxism through his *News from Nowhere* (Levitas, 2007: 56).

If there are commonalities between the education of desire and theories of governance that might be applied to the understanding of the use of visions in place-shaping, then there might also be other relationships between methods that are characteristic of conceiving and realising a utopia and the methods of place-shaping and town planning.

Utopia and Planning

The influence of utopianism on the theory and practice of town planning and urban design is well documented in planning history literature (e.g. Cherry, 1974; Cullingworth and Nadin, 2006; Fishman, 1977). In essence, town planning, both as a professional discipline and as a quasi-judicial means of administering the

management of development, emerged through debate about how issues of urban and rural settlement, including poor housing conditions and public health, could be resolved. Such debates often took as their inspiration the many experimental communities and model villages founded to house their workers by great Victorian industrialists, many of whom were influenced by contemporary utopian writings such as those of Robert Owen, Edward Bellamy and William Morris. Of these, Robert Owen is significant in having put his utopian ideas into practice with the construction of New Lanark, a planned village around his cotton mill in Scotland, and subsequently the less successful New Harmony in Indiana.

Drawing on such writings and examples at the end of the 19th century, Ebenezer Howard developed principles that were intended to underpin the creation of entire new self-contained towns designed to combine the social and economic benefits of cities with the well-being benefits of country living through consciously human-scaled and open design, restricting the size of the towns and surrounding them with permanent productive and accessible countryside. He published his ideas on these 'garden cities' in a book entitled *To-morrow – A Peaceful Path to Real Reform* (1898), which looked beyond just the design of such cities to how they would be financed, developed and managed, including principles for their governance, and which itself exhibited elements characteristic of utopian writing. The book – republished as *Garden Cities of To-morrow* (1902) – inspired the formation of the Garden Cities Association (later the Town and Country Planning Association), whose activities led to the construction of Letchworth Garden City in Hertfordshire, and the introduction of the world's first legislation to be designated 'town planning' in 1909 (Cherry, 1974).

It is worth noting that the planning legislation that resulted from this activity was much narrower than its progenitors such as Owen or Howard might have hoped, since it focused on managing the use and development of land, mainly for housing. The principles behind model villages and garden cities were wider in scope, seeking to unite the ways in which land was developed with other objectives and functions, including health, education, transportation and moral well-being, as well as the ways in which development and civic activities could be funded. In a sense, Owen and Howard were place-shapers, rather than planners.

English town planning continued to be described in utopian terms as it evolved as a profession and an administrative practice. Writing in the journal of the Town Planning Institute in 1938, just as planning was coming to be seen as a part of what would become known as the welfare state, Raymond Unwin, architect of the garden city movement, described 'the true purpose of planning' as 'creating in our pleasant land an environment more appropriate than any which could possibly result from haphazard development' (cited in Cherry, 1974: 247). Introducing the post-war Town and Country Planning Bill in 1947, Lewis Silkin declared that once enacted it would lead to 'a new era in the life of this country, an era in which human happiness, beauty, and culture will play a greater part in its social and economic life than they have ever done before' (HC Deb (1947) 432, col. 987).

Like utopia, town planning's visionary aspect fell out of favour in the late 20th century, as a result of not fitting with a postmodern, liberal view of the world. Of significant international influence on this issue is Jane Jacobs' *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (1964), which was cited with regard to English planning by Coleman et al. (1990) as taking an anti-utopian position on the management of the built environment. However, neither Jacobs nor Coleman et al make a case against the principles either of planning or of utopian principles, rather their criticism is of particular examples of both planning and utopia being applied in positivist, elitist and paternalistic ways.

Jacobs' criticism was levelled at a particular kind of utopia, the kind that rigidly applied a theoretical blueprint, vividly exemplified by Howard's garden city model which Jacobs claimed was 'a series of static acts' (Jacobs, 1964: 29). Conversely, it can be argued that it was not Howard's intention for his model to be rigidly adhered to in terms of the design of the place. For example, his description of a garden city was 'merely suggestive, and will probably be much departed from' (Howard, 1902: 14), an observation that was realised with the experience of conceiving and constructing both Letchworth and Welwyn Garden Cities (Fishman, 1977). For Coleman et al., utopia was 'the ideal environment ... which design control was intended to create' (1990: 3), apparently with the intention of mollifying its inhabitants. Architects and planners were criticised for assuming that their conception of an ideal environment

would create (presumably their conception of) ideal citizens – the now uncomfortably positivist principle of environmental determinism – whereas what was needed was a more nuanced appreciation that the design of the built environment can potentially constrain some behaviours and provide opportunities for others.

Experiences with the particular planning interventions cited in both Jacobs and Coleman et al do demonstrate many of the failings associated with undemocratically imposing a blueprint representing an incomplete physical solution onto areas beset by complex social issues, but these amount to criticisms of the specific actions taken in the reported cases, rather than of the generic activity of planning or the idea of utopia. The paternalistic imposition of 'expert' solutions to social issues – particularly housing issues – was perhaps the nadir of the modernist project in planning, and planners, designers and place-shapers should heed the lessons learned, particularly those relating to genuine community engagement in planning processes (ensuring that individual plans are mindful of changing circumstances and making planning processes generally more responsive to market processes) as well as architectural concepts that have influenced the movement known as the New Urbanism. (see Congress for the New Urbanism, 2013) It is worth noting, however, that the same New Urbanism movement that eschewed late 20th-century housing projects is nonetheless positive about the results of earlier paternalistic interventions in the making of new places, such as Edinburgh's New Town and Barcelona's Eixample District, now that these have evolved into vibrant mixed-use and mixed-income communities.

Jacobs' and Coleman et al's criticisms of utopia in planning, influential though they have been, focus on a narrow definition of utopianism that does not include the reflexive, non-paternalistic and iterative forms of utopianism prevalent since the late 20th century.

Characteristics of Utopia as Method in Place-Shaping

From a review of the key literature on utopianism it has been possible to identify methodological elements that are widely (though not inclusively) agreed to be characteristic of a Lefebvrian utopic approach relevant to place-shaping (the term

'utopic' is used here to distinguish methodological characteristics from the form or content of utopian writing). There are seven such elements operating in an iterative cycle (see **Figure 1**). Six form the overall cycle – Criticism, Conviction, Projection, Instantiation, Planning and Action – and all of these are linked by Education: the education of desire. These are addressed in turn below and related back to elements of the processes embodied in the English place-shaping system outlined above.

Education

Education forms the 'hub' of the cyclic utopic process: the propagandizing of change and the need for change through Abensour's concept of the 'education of desire' (Levitas, 2007: 56). A common perception of the purpose of utopias is to sell to a sceptical public a particular proposed alternative future: building consensus in support of the proposal (Cole, 2001; Stillman, 2001) by presenting 'some animating

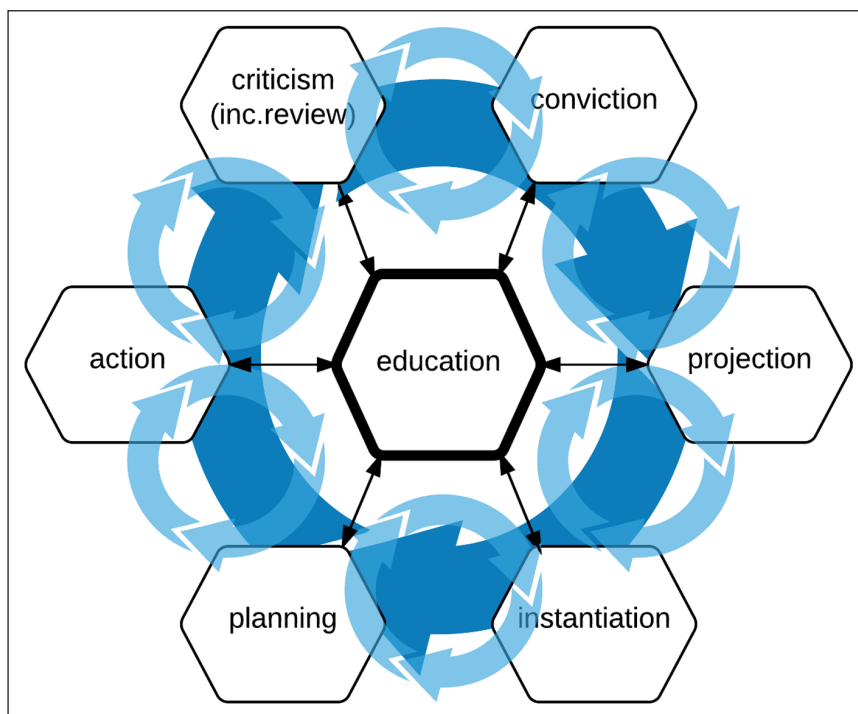


Figure 1: Diagrammatic representation of the utopic method. Source: author.

vision of what is to be done and why' (Harvey, 2000: 227). This is, for example, the impact that Howard hoped his vision of garden cities would have.

Friedman's axiomatic theory for achievable utopias states that a utopia cannot be achieved if it does not obtain collective agreement (2000: 18). It would be rare indeed for one person's vision of a better society to be so captivating as to instantly achieve complete consensus. Friedman argued that achievable utopias cannot be the invention of a single person: literary utopias from Plato to More, and since, have remained literary and not realized because they were the work of an individual, rather than having been slowly shaped and assimilated by a series of consenting individuals (2000: 21). This is not a new idea: Mumford described as a 'weakness' the assumption that 'the dreams and projects of any single man might be realized in society at large' (1922: 298).

But the education of desire goes beyond simply propagandizing a particular utopia or set of utopian principles; it is also instrumental both in popularizing the need for change in general, and in developing the proposal itself. Abensour's application of the term indicated that the purpose of utopian expression (in literature at least) was not necessarily to inspire readers towards putting the proposed utopia into practice, but to stimulate debate about the need for and form of social change in principle (Nadir, 2010). Even where a particular alternative society is proposed, this should not necessarily be taken as a blueprint, not least because a community's needs, and its understanding of its needs, will change during the time it takes to put the utopia into practice (hence the need for review): utopias must be 'provisional, reflexive and dialogic' (Levitas, 2013: 218). Utopias may be a starting point and a stimulus for debate about the future, but what really ignites the process is how thinking about a possibly improved or even idealised community can provide an 'indispensable link leading to public understanding, acceptance, enthusiasm and action' (Reiner, 1962: 106); they help us 'change the way we *think* about our possible future' (Levitas, 2013: 65, emphasis added), in order to break away from the social or political conventions that tend towards inertia.

The education of desire is the concept that binds Lefebvrian experimental utopianism and operates at all stages of the process. It is this aspect that is missing

– at least explicitly – from the prescribed place-shaping system in England. A significant part of the purpose of visions in community strategizing and planning may be about social learning and consensus building, and the vision itself is almost a by-product of those processes (Peel and Lloyd, 2005).

Criticism (and Review)

The expression of dissatisfaction is ‘the beginning of utopianism’ (Sargent, 2010: 49). Friedman said that utopias were born of a collective dissatisfaction (2000: 18); the collective nature of this dissatisfaction being essential to the realisation of utopias.

All utopias include ‘an ad hoc criticism of existing society’ (Goodwin and Taylor, 1982: 29); they ‘ask whether or not the way we live could be improved and answer that it could’ (Sargent, 2010: 5). The utopian method involves ‘simultaneously critiquing the present, exploring alternatives, imagining ourselves otherwise and experimenting with prefigurative practices’ (Levitas, 2013: 219). The critique element of utopian expression is the ‘basis of utopia’s claim to be taken seriously as political theory’, but utopianism differs from other types of social criticism in its narrative form and its demonstration in imagined or experimental practice (Goodwin and Taylor, 1982: 17), combined with the fact that ‘its analyses are conducted in the name of a better future’ (Pinder, 2002: 237).

A utopism’s validity as a political work depends upon it containing ‘a robust and meaningful criticism of the society’, which, combined with the rationality of the proposed alternative(s) based on this criticism, enhances its ‘capacity to arouse enthusiasm and support’ (Goodwin and Taylor, 1982: 121). It is easier to get people to agree on what is wrong with their society than to agree on how to achieve change or what changes to achieve. Hence, the first significant iteration of the utopic method is between the criticism of the existing society and the conviction to do something about it, with the education element playing a key role in demonstrating both that change is needed, and that it is possible. This dialectic moment is encapsulated by Levitas’ notional statement: ‘it doesn’t have to be like this’ (2007: 48). The criticism element of the utopic method repeats itself after other stages have been reached and

acted upon, as proposed alternatives, means by which they will be put in place, and actions actually taken are themselves criticised through the process of review.

It is sometimes argued that because 'conceptions of human happiness change' over time and because utopists 'cannot possibly predict all sources of human dissatisfaction, or all social and technical developments' (Goodwin and Taylor, 1982: 220–1), trying to achieve a utopia based upon a perception of truth at any particular time is irrational. This argument is at the heart of the post-modern critique of utopia being based around the pursuit of greater truths that cannot be said to exist in a plural society. But since most aspects of human happiness and well-being are reasonably consistent over time, it is reasonable to construct a vision of a society in which a greater proportion of people can be said to be happy or have their needs met. Moving towards such a society enables the vision to be refined.

Such a position rejects the post-modern caricature of utopian expression as necessarily prescribing a static or authoritarian society, which would be 'either stultifying or unbelievable (or both)' (Stillman, 2001: 9). There are many examples of utopisms across history whose principles have accommodated or encouraged ongoing change. Plato responded to criticism that his own *Republic* was only one interpretation of an ideal society, based upon his wisdom by including in his later work *Laws* means by which the titular governing laws of his utopia could be amended (Sargent, 2010: 18) and More's *Utopia* describes how the essentially pagan society tolerated the introduction of Christianity, the expansion of the nation's territories abroad and its accommodation of immigrants.

Utopias exhibit a 'half-life' (Moylan and Baccolini, 2007: 216) as communities work to put them into practice and circumstances and viewpoints change on the journey. The need to allow for review is demonstrated by the failures of communities and societies that have been conceived as static in totality (from political minority enclaves to authoritarian states, with the exception of some religious communities), but also by the partial successes of the welfare state and feminism (Goodwin and Taylor, 1982) and the garden city movement. Utopias may not be successfully and completely achieved, but partial failure is 'the first step toward other possibilities

nevertheless' (Coleman, 2013: 349), and practitioners should recognise 'the necessary failure of utopia as method even as an element in its success' (Levitas, 2013: 220).

The dialectic and experimental utopianism proposed by Lefebvre (Lefebvre, 2000) demands an iterative approach that relies upon being open to reinterpretation and review (Pinder, 2002). This principle is rooted as much in early utopian thought as it is in recent thought reacting to the post-modern demand for self-reflexivity. Within the utopic method, review is not only the element that completes the full cycle: it operates in concert with education to ensure that each stage in the process enables feedback on both the feasibility and political acceptability of what is identified or proposed in that moment. The potential outcomes of the review process, at any stage, could range from acceptance that reinforces the current direction of travel, through modifications of varying degrees of significance, up to the point of a critical stop, which might demand that any element of the strategy for implementing the utopia, including the selected alternative projection, or even the original criticism, needs to be revisited.

This step in the utopic method is well-rehearsed in English place-shaping practice, with public sector agencies particularly being subject to considerable requirements with regard to both (a) responding to criticisms from stakeholders and the wider public of their activities and the state of the place they are involved with governing, and (b) gathering evidence of the need for physical development or improvement of services, and monitoring the impact of policies and programmes on the ground. The more comprehensive and open these agencies are about these data, the more support can be established for place-shaping programmes, and hence the more impactful such programmes may be. However, public engagement in such practices remains fraught with difficulty (e.g. Brownill and Carpenter, 2007) and it is to a certain extent the role of the utopic method to address some of these difficulties by explicitly relating the vision for the future of a place to the available evidence, including public opinion, regarding the appropriateness of the proposed course of action in comparison to others.

Conviction

The practical face of utopianism is based on the identification of a need to change for the better the things about society that have been criticised. This is typified by Levitas' conviction that 'it doesn't have to be like this' (2007: 48) and a pragmatic attempt to solve the specific, identified problems (Goodwin and Taylor, 1982: 122). The desire for change is motivational, but without the will to effect change, the utopian impulse is simply day-dreaming.

Utopias cannot be achieved without collective agreement (Friedman, 2000: 18). This agreement relates to both the need for change and the commitment to achieve it. The success of experimental co-operative communities has been shown to depend upon a 'strong sense of utopian commitment' among members, reflected in a shared value system and/or moral order (Goodwin and Taylor, 1982: 187). While visionary leadership or religious belief can be a part of developing and maintaining such a value system (which explains why religious communities have often been the most successful), these are not prerequisites. Studies of intentional communities in the 1960s and 1970s by Rosabeth Moss Kanter (cited in Goodwin and Taylor, 1982) suggest that collective and mutual reinforcement of values and commitment among participants is the most effective means of achieving this.

An important aspect of the self-reinforcing nature of such collective commitment is 'the happiness generated by living in a society of happy people' (Goodwin and Taylor, 1982: 207) and this can be at the heart of the function of the education element of the utopic method. It should be asserted clearly to the community that the purpose of utopic action is 'the desire for a better way of living' (Pinder, 2002: 238), that it is concerned with promoting this collective happiness. Recognizing that the collective development of utopia is critical to its success, ultimately the conviction to act to resolve the criticism of existing society 'must necessarily be a proposition for discussion and negotiation, the beginning of a process, not a statement of closure' (Levitas, 2007: 64).

In English place-shaping, this conviction was felt and expressed by the local strategic partnership (LSP), the statutory partnership between councils and public-,

private- and voluntary-sector service providers operating in their area. The LSP may be seen as the institutional equivalent of Bruno Taut's 'city crown', a proposal for an architectural space intended to allow different communities within his imagined city to meet and exchange issues and ideas relating to the operation of the city as a whole (Altenmüller and Mindrup, 2009). While Taut's vision assumed that 'the herd instinct, the elementary power of amalgamation' would result in a natural collective agreement to act in accordance with the city's utopian principles, the English place-shaping system, more pragmatically, relied upon transactional agreements between LSP partners, with the democratically accountable council, in theory at least, taking a coordinating meta-governance role and acting as 'scrutineer' of the partner agencies' actions (Lyons, 2007: 182).

Projection

Having identified what aspects of contemporary society need to be changed in the criticism element of the utopic approach, the utopists move on to posit, or project, an alternative society in which those criticized aspects are addressed and righted: this is the response to Levitas' first question: 'how, then, should we live?' (2007: 48). The word 'then' in this question is key: the future alternative society must be a response to both the desire of the community for change, and their articulation of what its faults are.

This projection of the future society may be the utopia described in a utopism, or the vision presented in a place-shaping strategy.

Proposing alternatives ('what is not') to replace the flawed status quo ('what is') is one of the distinguishing features of a utopian approach over other forms of political criticism (Stillman, 2001: 11). Further, a utopism's validity as a political work depends upon it rationally proposing alternative societies that respond explicitly to the criticism of the contemporary society, and upon an analysis of the needs of a community and of human nature; the alternatives so proposed comprising 'social forms to accommodate these' (Goodwin and Taylor, 1982: 217); hence utopianism is characterised by 'rational perception and rational knowledge of the world' (according to Jean Servier, cited in Goodwin and Taylor, 1982: 220).

Even though the societies proposed in utopisms are rooted in a rational understanding of needs and issues, utopianism's advantage over other forms of thinking about the future is its use of the imagination to go beyond the straightforward extrapolation of current trends. Utopias are an attempt to envisage the 'what is not' (Stillman, 2001) or the 'absent presence [through] speculation, judgment and suspension of disbelief on the part of both the writer and reader' (Levitas, 2013: 197). The positive use of imagination is a distinguishing characteristic of utopia which 'makes possible the escape from the tyranny of pure logic and from the stubbornness of brute fact' (Stillman, 2001: 14), and in doing so throws the dogmatic nature of prevailing ideologies into sharp relief.

Utopianism's constructive mode squares rationality with imagination by the avoidance of 'wild fantasy and exotic science fiction' (Goodwin and Taylor, 1982: 211). This is not to say that fantasy should have no place in utopianism, but for a utopia to be *achievable*, utopists should only concern themselves with those aspects of the future society that can reasonably be influenced through volition, and not with those which are necessarily outside of the society's control. Hence, realism is embedded within the discourse of achievable utopias (Geoghegan, 2007).

Friedman rooted his achievable utopias in reality by asserting that the solutions needed to address dissatisfaction would necessarily already be known: utopias, he said, can arise only if there is a known cure (Friedman, 2000: 18). This is perhaps slightly simplistic, depending on what is meant by a 'known cure', as it would appear to rule out solutions which may reasonably be anticipated to become 'known', which are theoretically 'known' but not yet demonstrated through experimentation to be effective, or which are 'known' but not feasible to implement on the scale of a whole community. A topical illustrative example might be driverless cars, which have featured in science fiction for decades. Just one decade ago it was only possible to imagine such a concept, and now they are on the verge of being introduced, with pilot schemes in English cities including Milton Keynes, a post-war English new town whose development was arguably influenced by utopian thinking (Innovate UK, 2014).

The process of 'exploring alternatives' is central to utopia as method (Levitas, 2013: 219). A utopism presents both the status quo and 'at least one alternative

vision' (Levitas, 2007: 65), which 'serves to focus on otherness or alterity as a theme' (Stillman, 2001: 15). The dialectic between discrete but 'mutually informing' societies is 'the most characteristic feature of all utopias' (Ruppert, 1986: 7). The utopists may choose to support their preferred utopia with a range of projected alternatives, some of which may be presented as undesirable (as a dystopia), which might include a 'do nothing' option. In presenting any preferred alternative, the utopists should ask themselves whether other alternatives could meet the same goals, and/or indicate 'permissible deviations' from the overall vision in response to this, including identifying the point at which such deviations would lead to the vision having a fundamentally different identity (Reiner, 1962: 161). Such action can help to anticipate how the principles of the utopia may need to be revised in response to feedback both through the education element, and through the process of review.

The extent to which alternatives have been posited on the basis of rationally addressing the criticism of the existing society and rooted in an understanding of what realistically can be achieved should positively reinforce the building of consensus through education; if not, the principles upon which the utopia is based may need to be revised. Demonstrating how the principles will work in practice may help with this positive reinforcement, especially where the imaginative element of the projection of alternatives departs from what the community might immediately see as being realistic or achievable: this is the role of instantiation.

Instantiation

The first stage of answering Levitas' second question 'how can that be?' (2007: 48) is to consider whether the superior alternative proposed in a utopism is possible, reasonable and internally consistent (Reiner, 1962). Utopists test this through 'thought experiments' (Goodwin and Taylor, 1982: 210) demonstrated through depicting instances (hence 'instantiation') of everyday life in practice within the proposed society. Some consider this to be the single defining characteristic of utopian writing (Stillman, 2001; Sargent, 2010): 'The strength of ... the utopian method is precisely that it deals with the concrete instantiation of values, enabling a level of real exploration and judgment' (Levitas, 2007: 57).

Instantiation enables utopisms to go beyond simply stating what the principles and institutions of the proposed alternative society would be and show how the society based on those principles and institutions would look and feel, giving detailed narratives of life within the alternative society, including the imagined experiences of ordinary individuals (Stillman, 2001), so displaying 'everyday life transformed' (Sargent, 2010: 4). Such narratives enable the utopist to describe the nature of the society's institutions (from governments to families) and how these interact; work and leisure activities; and the stability, resilience and flexibility of the society (Stillman, 2001).

While literary utopias have developed the fictional narrative form of telling stories about life in imagined places, instantiation can take other forms, including more direct, prosaic description, as in *Garden Cities of To-morrow* (Howard, 1902), or in the form of a question-and-answer format, as in *Principles of Communism* (Engels, 1847), the latter taking full advantage of the potential for a dialectic of alternative projections using the variety of perspectives of narrator, visitor, utopian native or sceptical listener (Reiner, 1962).

The act of instantiation can also go beyond the simple description presented by the utopist to their readers. In place-shaping and town planning practice it is very rare for a draft strategy to include narratives that really describe instances of future life in the way that fictional utopisms do. Some promise to, but fail to deliver, such as the SCS for Bath and North East Somerset. The frontispiece of this is entitled 'Bath and North East Somerset in 2026 – A Day in the Life' and begins with 'It is a warm July morning in 2026'. The SCS then outlines a few ways in which the community has been improved over the intervening years, with no explanation as to the relevance of the month, time of day or weather that had been specified (Bath and North East Somerset LSP, 2009, n.pag.).

Instead, the reader is often implicitly expected to imagine for themselves what life would be like when the activities or proposals described in a consultation document have been implemented. Only rarely is the reader explicitly invited to do so, as in the city of Barnsley's SCS from 2011 which included a section headed 'Imagine a Barnsley where...' (One Barnsley, 2011: 11). A consultation process can replicate the fictional

question-and-answer form of instantiation, but with real people taking the roles of Raphael Hythloday, Peter Giles and Thomas More, as portrayed in the first book of *Utopia*, conversing about the proposed new community.

Instantiation is the cornerstone in utopianism's education function – it is through imagining themselves in the alternative society that a utopism's readers can properly be informed of the true effects of its intentions, helping either to justify the utopia, or, if the reader is not convinced, to help the reader imagine how it could be improved. Instantiation enables the utopist and the reader to ensure the utopia is internally consistent and to identify and resolve areas of potential misunderstanding. An experimental utopianism might also permit the use of simulations to assist with this process, which might include role-play, virtual reality or smaller-scale or temporary applications of the principles of the new community. Depending on the scale of such activities, the distinction between instantiation and action could become blurred.

With a Lefebvrian approach, it is possible to take a wider view of instantiation than simply describing the practices of everyday life in fictive form within the utopism. Rather, the subsequent stages of planning and action are also forms of instantiation, taking experiments beyond thought and towards practice, and learning from these experiences in order to strengthen or revise the utopian principles, just as the thought experiments of traditional utopian instantiation are intended. In doing so it follows that it should be clear to the community that they are participating in an experiment, and perhaps this is where the experiment of post-war social housing, as criticised by Coleman et al. (1990), particularly failed: here, the citizens were presented with housing perceived as solution imposed upon them, rather than as experiment in which they were willing and active participants.

Planning and Action

Responding to the second part of Levitas' question 'how can that be?' (Levitas, 2007: 48) requires utopists to consider how to transcend from the status quo to their desired alternative, and then actually do it. However, there is little inherently utopian about processes of planning and construction – beyond the justification for and creation of

a vision – other than the relationship of the planning and implementation processes to that vision and to the education of desire.

In practice, the key issues are whether plans and actions taken in the context of a place-shaping vision necessarily lead to the direct implementation of that vision. It is questionable whether actions ever necessarily follow strategies, especially in circumstances where contextual circumstances are liable to change faster than strategizing can keep up.

Utopias do not 'provide the solutions in the fashion of a road map, [but rather] the promise that somewhere, sometime mischief will be overcome for good' (Manthey and Rohgalf, 2009: 12); a view that appears to constrain the function of utopia to the provision of hope or consolation rather than being an active force for change. This is only partially true. While many literary utopias do not attempt to demonstrate how the utopia might be achieved, many others – including influential works such as More, Bellamy and Morris – do describe some of the fictive history of how their utopia came about, even if that fictional process might not be replicable in reality: '...while many utopians do not explicitly light the way between now and the future, many do [but] we probably miss the transition because we focus on the utopian future...' (Sargent, 2007: 308).

Utopianism tends to privilege the description of utopia as outcome over the processes that would bring that utopia into being (Moylan, 2006). Many utopian scholars are uncomfortable with planning 'because it reminds us of so many plans gone wrong' (Sargent, 1994: 4). Conversely, while action in the name of utopian change need not be utopian in nature, it can be argued, as Lefebvre did, that utopianism without action to realise utopias is hollow; for him, the value of utopia 'never lay in its elegance as an exclusively theoretical exercise' (Coleman, 2013: 357). Howard's garden city concept was properly utopian: it 'proved more than mere vision since some of its ideas were put into practice' (Blowers and Evans, 1997: n.pag.).

Hence, realistic proposals to put the principles of a utopia in place, and actions to achieve this, are essential components of utopianism. Without them, utopia's 'social dreaming' is no more than speculation or fantasy, and the hope that underlies the psychologically reassuring aspect of utopianism may be undermined. Furthermore,

if the proposals and actions intended to deliver the intended new society fail to do so, then utopianism is similarly undermined, as both planning and utopianism were seen to be undermined by the failures of social housing projects in the late 20th century (Jacobs, 1964; Coleman et al., 1990). But these failures reflected the paternalistic imposition of solutions upon communities, often imposed in inflexible ways, rather than working with communities to develop solutions and continuing to work on developing and enhancing them on an ongoing basis.

Even if utopisms have tended to neglect the question of how to transition from the status quo to the preferred alternative, utopia as method should be more concerned with 'humanity's journey towards a horizon, rather than its arrival at a place determined by a utopian agenda' (Moynan, 2006: 5). Lefebvre's approach offers some thoughts on that journey, suggesting that improved societies should be 'achievable step by step without banishing consideration of consequences along the way' with each step enabling a community to 'bring alternatives slightly closer, collapsing the divide "between the possible and the impossible", making transformation appear convincingly achievable' (Coleman, 2013: 357).

The planning and action elements of the utopic method should therefore provide for a strategy or action plan, and the subsequent activity, that together result in addressing the criticism of the existing society by realising the preferred projection. Planning and constructing the society would involve significant scope for iteration, allowing the education element to ensure that issues that cannot be resolved are fed back to the earlier stages, and to ensure that 'deviations' are 'permissible' within the scope of the utopia (Reiner, 1962: 161). In this respect, planning and action can be seen as further means of testing the utopia through instantiation – taking the idea of a 'thought experiment' a step closer to an actual scientific experiment – issues that perhaps might not have been foreseen before may be revealed when concrete proposals are being considered.

All action in the name of utopia must reflect the iterative nature of the utopic method, and must be seen as experimental and provisional. Levitas said that utopia as method should involve 'simultaneously critiquing the present, exploring alternatives, imagining ourselves otherwise and *experimenting with prefigurative practices*'

(Levitas, 2013: 219, emphasis added). Lefebvre said that utopia should 'be considered experimentally by studying its implications and consequences on the ground' (Lefebvre, 2000: 151). Experimental communities that laid the foundations for town planning, such as Saltaire (West Yorkshire), Port Sunlight (Merseyside) and Bournville (Birmingham), as well as the garden cities, are part of the heritage of experimental utopianism (Cherry, 1974); appraisal of those and subsequent communities has influenced, and continues to influence, both utopianism and place-shaping practice. In these respects, actions taken in the name of utopia are necessarily reflexive, in the context of an overall dialectical and experimental approach to utopianism.

Conclusion

This literature review has shown that the use of visions in local governance and place-shaping shares two important factors with utopianism. First, there is a misapprehension that the purpose of visions is to produce a description of a future state of society as a blueprint that must slavishly be followed until it is realised in full and thereafter never changed, despite there being little evidence either that place-shaping visions have ever successfully achieved such an outcome, or that utopia has ever claimed an intention so to do. Second, it should be recognised that what actually underlies both practices is a dialectical or experimental effort to build consensus around the need for change and solutions to address that need.

Because both utopia and town planning (and hence place-shaping) have – with some justification – been criticised for imposing static solutions to social issues upon communities, there is value in extracting understandings from the theory and practice of both activities which recognise the same dialectical and experimental approach. The parallels between the social-learning or consensus-building interpretation of the use of visions in place-shaping, and the 'education of desire' that lies at the heart of utopianism, are strong, and this has been shown to form a practicable basis around which a utopic method for formulating place-shaping strategies can be constructed.

The posited framework so identified will form the basis for empirical research, the purpose of which will be to test the extent to which the iterative utopic approach to achieve community change through social learning has relevance to the way in

which selected communities in England have envisaged their futures, in order to address the issue of what the purpose and efficacy of visions are meant to be in English place-shaping.

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Competing Interests

Since 2014, MT has been employed as head of planning at the Campaign to Protect Rural England, a role which involves seeking to influence national and local government on the operation of planning and place-shaping in England.

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