

Introduction: Towards Utopian Possibilities

Liam Benison

Every utopia is a hovering, a suspension, between
possibility and impossibility.

PAUL TILLICH

Paul Tillich highlighted the essential tension of utopian hope, which the authors of the essays in this volume address from a variety of perspectives. As Ruth Levitas explains, although utopia has “real power to transform the given, social world, including the economic”, Tillich warns that a side effect of the struggle “to negate the negative in human experience” is disillusionment as a result of the failure to recognize the provisionality of utopian possibilities (Levitas, 2013: 17–18). This tension is essential to modern utopian thinking, one set in play by Thomas More, who Fátima Vieira argues, is responsible for reconfiguring utopian desire as a tension between the affirmation of a possibility and the negation of its fulfilment (Vieira, 2010: 4). Engagement with this tension is critical to realizing the best possibilities from utopian thought and action.

The objective of this volume is to explore the power of the utopian imagination, and to submit old and new utopian models and discourses to analysis and critique. The thirty-eight brief essays consider many kinds of utopian models that have been proposed from the Renaissance to the present day. They include literary, architectural, and visual artistic models, as well as historically realized communities that have challenged societies’ politics, and reshaped their imagined communities. While the utopian imagination by definition assumes a more positive vision of the future, the realization of changes inspired by utopian visions will not be regarded as positive for all. What Tom Moylan refers to as the “negative function” of reshaping society for the better entails necessary destruction. While we might hope, like Moylan, that the destruction “unleashes new progressive energies as it cuts through the knots of structural and ideological atrophy”, the fierce opposition, if not, repression, that will be aroused in those social and political agents whose power and privileges

are challenged may in itself shift social perceptions and definitions of what is utopian, anti-utopian, or dystopian, depending on one's perspective and position in a changing social order. In their separate essays, Michel Macedo Marques and Ceren Ünlü highlight the extent to which the meaning and evaluation (positive or negative) of imagined communities and shared memories of events can be transformed in the course of the struggle between progressive and reactionary social forces. Typically, utopians have a tendency to focus on the light on the hill at the expense of the challenges and risks of the climb, and of what might be lost along the way. Indeed, it might be argued that such a focus is essential to maintain hope in the possibility of change for the better, and persist in struggling with the complex problems and against the resistance that must attend change in complex societies. The essays in this book address the tension between these poles in a variety of ways.

One persistent thread through these essays is the question of how knowledge has been used in the past and might be used in the future to construct an inclusive society that allows for the happiness and well-being of all its citizens. Nina Liebhaver and Lars Keller submit this question to sustained analysis in their essay, and argue for the need to understand the nature of utopian knowledge in a more systematic way so that we can understand how to reshape knowledge for positive utopian objectives. Lisa Garforth also considers the problem of knowledge; in particular, the gap between knowledge and action in discussions of how to motivate behavioural changes to ameliorate climate change. She points to the importance of desire in determining how to deal with the phenomenon that Kim Stanley Robinson so aptly named "The Dithering", as part of her argument for why the utopian imagination is so important in discussions of how to respond more decisively to climate change.

The essays by Marques and Ünlü are also revealing of the ways in which knowledge and social imaginary can be co-opted and manipulated by powerful political, military, and economic interests to stymie progressive social change. These historical essays have important relevance for contemporary democratic struggles to realize a more inclusive foundation for a wider sharing of wealth and power in deeply unequal and authoritarian societies. These essays demonstrate that the raw material of utopian possibilities lies all around us, in the institutions and traditions of the social fabric and in the minds and memories of people. The challenge is to awaken hope and belief in the possibility of change in enough people. Martin Greenwood and JC Niala examine two unique social institutions of Britain—the Post Office and the allotment—to find utopian sources of hope and inspiration for social reform that might offer paths to a more equal and cohesive, less authoritarian future.

Utopian Possibilities is divided into nine parts, which address different themes or disciplinary approaches to the question of how the discourses, conceptions, and literary works of the utopian tradition might inform the search for new possibilities that can break through the resistance and dithering that ossifies many contemporary political, social, economic, and legal frameworks.

With respect for the essentially spatial and architectural nature of utopian thought (Leibacher-Ouvrard, 1989: 93; Marin, 1990: 9), the essays in Part 1 discuss models of utopia from architecture and the visual arts. Jennifer Hankin looks at the utopian implications of the ways in which contemporary art installations shock and estrange their viewers. Jennifer Raum asks some challenging questions about the possibilities for utopian architectural worldbuilding. Filipe Brandão looks at digital methods that are facilitating new ways of both imagining and constructing interior living spaces with potential benefits for both user participation and climate harm reduction. Pavla Veselá meditates on the idiosyncratic utopian propositions of the Russian Futurist Velimir Khlebnikov.

Part 2 looks in depth at three historical models of utopian society. Anna Di Bello introduces three essays that trace the evolution of the connection between the concept of utopia and ideas of the perfect society: Francesca Russo's historical analysis of the utopian theories of Antonio Brucioli, Italia Maria Cannataro's breakdown of the principles of Domingo F. Sarmiento's transatlantic notion of utopia in *Facundo: Civilization and Barbarism*, and Anna Rita Gabellone's unveiling of the history of council communism in Britain.

The history of influential literary models of utopia are the focus of essays in Part 3. Liam Benison examines the shift in utopian conceptions of privacy and private property between Thomas More's *Utopia* and Hendrik Smeeks's *Krinke Kesmes*. Gabriella Hartvig reads some creative and varied Hungarian interpretations of *Robinson Crusoe*. Albert Göschl looks at the expression of nineteenth-century discourses of hygiene in utopian works by Jules Verne and Paolo Mantegazza. Marta Komsta delves into the world of nineteenth-century Spiritualism to show how it combines notions of the afterlife with progressive ideology and desire for radical reform. Finally, Kenneth Hanshew compares two important and distinctive South Slavic utopias.

Part 4 is devoted to the examination of the creation and reshaping of a number of models of imagined community. Michel Macedo Marques discusses the fate of the twentieth-century Brazilian intentional community Caldeirão da Santa Cruz do Deserto, which combined messianic, ecological, and socialist characteristics. Ceren Ünlü shows how the Turkish state set out to suppress the memory of progressive political activism in the 1960s and 1970s. José Eduardo Reis unpicks Svetlana Alexievich's response to the fall of the Soviet imaginary in *Secondhand Time*. Martin Greenwood walks us through the British Post Office's

potential to inspire social democratic renewal. JC Niala highlights the structures of diversity and openness in Britain's allotment movement. Finally, Cristina Gil introduces the conceptualization of Deaftopia, discussing a variety of ways in which the imaginary of d/Deaf communities is constructed.

Literary evocations of utopian playfulness, dystopian counterpoint, and possibility are the focus of essays in Part 5, which discuss a number of prominent and lesser known literary utopias and dystopias. Divya Singh examines the Dalit novel within the framework of utopianism, considering the ways in which the anti-caste politics of Paul Chirrakarode's *Pulayathara* mobilizes a disruption of the real. Kevin Hogg looks at how Marge Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time* anticipates more recent developments in gender identity politics. Matthew Leggatt calls for greater recognition of the possibilities of the utopian form's playfulness, taking his cue from a Facebook group called Boring Dystopia. Evanir Pavloski questions the myth of a rigid opposition between utopia and dystopia through the lens of Ursula K. Le Guin's "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas". Bence Gábor Kvéder continues the critique of the border between utopia and dystopia by looking at the legacy of Swiftian satire in a recent Hungarian adaptation of *Gulliver's Travels*. Finally, Adela Catană and Mary-Jane Rădulescu turn their enquiry to the problem of memory and identity in *The Hunger Games* and *The Maze Runner*, considering the dystopian implications of psychological stress and post-traumatic stress disorder.

Part 6 has three reflections on *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Nusret Ersöz reads against the grain for the threads of Orwell's ideas on moderation and decency, while Almudena Machado-Jiménez reads in a different direction to deconstruct Orwell's patriarchal imagination from a feminist perspective. Imola Bülgözdí then brings Orwell into the post-truth era with a reading of the visual novel, *Orwell: Ignorance Is Strength*, which allows readers to navigate the moral dilemmas of our times for themselves.

Possibilities to address the climate crisis and the dysfunctional social impacts of capitalism are the subject of Part 7. Lisa Garforth argues that two pairs of contradictory elements of utopia, namely, cognitive estrangement and affective inspiration, and critique and affirmation, are valuable resources to confront climate change. António Ferreira and Ori Rubin dissect the problematics of the triple-imperatives of twenty-first century capitalism: endless acceleration of mobility, proliferation of digital technologies, and the desire for incessant economic growth. Tom Redshaw deconstructs the cyberlibertarian utopianism of crypto-capitalism, subjecting the widely propagated utopian possibilities of Bitcoin to a rare and incisive critique. Cara Linley considers the possibilities and questions offered by post-apocalyptic fictions to reimagine how property rights might be constructed outside the framework of the nation-state.

The three essays in Part 8 subject the social consequences of the spreading use of artificial intelligence (AI) to sustained analysis through the exploration of a variety of literary works. Ilenia Vittoria Casmiri outlines the ways in which Kazuo Ishiguro's *Klara and the Sun* highlights the complex questions about human empathy which are raised by the advent of robots with AI. Dana Svorova provides a thought-provoking counterpoint to Casmiri's analysis with her exploration of emotional AI in several science fiction works. Through the lens of Richard K. Morgan's "Altered Carbon" trilogy, Anna Bugajska considers how future law might be designed to address the dilemmas posed by AI and biotechnology.

The final part of the book has three essays that present theoretically informed overviews of approaches to utopian education, knowledge, and utopian transformation. Zorica Đergović-Joksimović asks the provocative question, "Can utopia be taught and, consequently, learned?" Most utopian scholars are also teachers, and focus on the teaching of the tradition, while many are also invested in activism, and in encouraging others to *become* utopians, in the words of Moylan. Offering students the opportunity to write their own utopias as Đergović-Joksimović has done remains rare. Her students surprised her, and may surprise readers, with their ideas.

Nina Liebhauer and Lars Keller argue that utopian thinking, however open to alternative possibilities, needs modelling and guidance. They propose a typology of utopian knowledge, a framework to facilitate productive forms of utopian education able to identify blind spots and anti-utopian ideas. The authors aspire to develop new approaches to knowledge, and emphasize that utopian thinking embraces the many ways in which we can know the world, including feelings, dreams and hopes.

Finally, Tom Moylan issues a cautionary note about the positivity, optimism, or hope that readers might discern in many of the essays. Moylan warns us to be vigilant to ensure that our utopian thinking and speculation is informed by "a critical negation of the present order of things" in order to truly open up the possibility of genuine change by becoming better utopians. He recommends Marx's "ruthless critique" of the current order as the exemplum for the utopian approach.

As in utopian studies generally, these essays do not propose blueprints for change but rather propositions, critiques of theories and ideas, considered in the context of different disciplinary frameworks including art and architecture, literary criticism, history, law, and a sociological analysis of technological developments such as AI. The essays in this volume accept the premise that utopianism is a form of social critique, a stimulus to critical thinking about the social, political, ecological, and other "wicked" problems that create conflicts, divisions, and inhumane consequences in modern societies.

The diversity of essays offers readers a variety of approaches to the question of the possibilities inherent and inspirational in the particular forms of thought and artistic production which we may call utopian. We hope that those interested in utopian possibilities will find something of interest whatever your particular perspective or disciplinary background.

Works Cited

Leibacher-Ouvrard, Lise (1989), *Libertinage et utopies sous le règne de Louis XIV*. Genève: Librairie Droz.

Levitas, Ruth (2013), *Utopia as Method: The Imaginary Reconstruction of Society* (Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan).

Marin, Louis (1990), *Utopics: The Semiological Play of Textual Spaces*. Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press International.

Tillich, Paul (1973), "Critique and Justification of Utopia", in *Utopias and Utopian Thought*, ed. Frank E. Manuel (London: Souvenir Press), p. 302.

Vieira, Fátima (2010), "The Concept of Utopia", in *The Cambridge Companion to Utopian Literature*, ed. Gregory Claeys (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), pp. 3–27.

