7.1. Affects, Effects, and Action: Utopia and the Climate Crisis

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Abstract

This essay reflects on questions of what utopia can bring to the contemporary climate crisis. It focuses in particular on tensions in current climate debates between calls for radical structural change and the efforts of environmental educators and others to nurture individual changes in response to the climate challenge. Climate educators are often primarily concerned about the "knowledge-action gap" and ask why greater understanding of climate change has not translated into personal lifestyle and behavioural change. Critical climate theorists suggest that such individual changes are either trivial or irrelevant in the face of an intractable and apparently unstoppable system of extractive fossil capitalism. I argue that utopian studies offers multiple concepts and arguments for thinking through tensions between the individual and the social, between desire and agency, between hope and action, which are particularly pressing at this moment in climate history. I suggest that utopia's many contradictions — its capacity for both cognitive estrangement and affective inspiration; its critical and its affirmative dimensions — should be treated as resources to think and act with as we learn to live both with and against climate change.

Key words: utopia, climate hange, collective, individual

In 2012, looking back at our present moment as history in and from *2312*, Kim Stanley Robinson suggested that the early twenty-first century would be characterized at the social level as a period of suspension between knowledge and action, which in the novel is called "the Dithering". Donna Haraway, citing the novel, glossed the Dithering as a "state of indecisive agitation" (2016: 102). In both Robinson's narrative and Haraway's discussion, the Dithering feels like a collective problem, something like a structure of feeling, rather than anything attributable to individual knowledge–action gaps.

In *2312*, it is estimated that the Dithering lasted about 55 years from 2005 until 2060. This period of indecision and inaction guaranteed that meaningful climate responses taken by earthly humans were remedial, not preventative. In *Ministry for the Future*, published in 2020, Robinson explored a period of rapid climate transition, by many means necessary, taking place between around 2025 and 2045. In a talk on the eve of COP26 in Glasgow, Robinson intimated that this window is probably over-optimistic (The Dear Green Bothy, 2021).

Today's world is well into the Dithering that Robinson projected, and its window is apparently closing. We have reached, perhaps, the end of wholesale denial (corporate, personal, and political). We have seen a wave of visible climate activism under the banner of "change now or extinction". We have arrived by COP26 at a widely shared sense that the time for action can no longer be delayed.

Maybe it is useful to talk about reaching a point in the Dithering when both climate knowledge and climate change effects are pressing hard on economic, policy, and political processes. Both are also being translated in sophisticated ways into culture and social debate. The logic of the need for radical action to avoid a potentially catastrophic future is fully alive in the public sphere. But individual and collective commitments to change remain inadequate, both on the plane of everyday action and in regard to the much bigger structural shifts needed to divert global society from trajectories that lead to average warming above 2 °Celsius (a limit still too high to avoid severe planetary consequences).

In this context, there can be a problematic gulf between work, for example, in environmental education that focuses primarily on individual and behaviour changes, and approaches that focus on the necessity of large-scale structural changes, in particular, materialist critiques that examine how an extractive and racialized capitalism has been entangled with the geo-economic changes that we call the Anthropocene.

In recent years it has been increasingly common to hear from progressive and radical thinkers that personal and individual changes are inadequate, even irrelevant, to making a safe and equitable climate future. The logic is that the capitalist profit motive — and often, more specifically, identifiable industries and firms — have caused the climate predicament, and only large-scale restriction of carbon-emitting capitalist activities can turn things around. Governments are held to be hopelessly overrun by specific lobbying interests, and more generally over-invested in economic growth as the (only) path to progress. For some critics on the left then, the climate dilemma is frequently rewritten as the latest iteration of capitalist chaos and injustice, and the solution is the end or radical curtailing of production for profit, whether via some form of greened democratic socialism or a global economic revolution.

However true and important these insights, they are frequently framed at a level of abstraction so large that the particularity of fossil capitalism and the imbrication of people in it — as citizens and/or consumers, or as victims and/or complicit — disappears from the picture. We are left with the idea that only a single kind of change, a global revolutionary overthrow of capitalism, can save us from the climate crisis. The risk here is of reinscribing a single telic story about the end of capitalism and the unlocking of the climate crisis, while in real terms, many of us remain stuck in the middle of the trouble hoping against hope and acting in small ways however best we can.

To defer again to Kim Stanley Robinson: "Instantaneous world revolution? Gimme a break" (Goodell, 2020). Haraway again expands: "The stories of both the Anthropocene and the Capitalocene teeter constantly on the brink of becoming much Too Big". She observes that they feature "too-big players in the too-big stories of Capitalism and the Anthropos, both of which invite oddly apocalyptic panics and even odder, disengaged denunciations", and worries about a "game over, too late" discussion, which is heard "in both expert and popular discourses, in which both technotheocratic geoengineering fixes and wallowing in despair seem to coinfect any possible common imagination" (2016: 50, 55–6).

So we need to think creatively and not just critically about how to get on in the middle of the Dithering, a moment of acute awareness of climate dilemmas without a sense of immediate action. As in Haraway's figuration of the current crisis,

> the doings of situated, actual human beings [and nonhuman beings] matter. It matters with which ways of living and dying we cast our lot rather than others. ... Diverse human and nonhuman players are necessary in every fibre of the tissues of the urgently needed Chthulucene story. The chief actors are not restricted to the too-big players in the too-big stories. (Haraway, 2016: 55)

What can utopia do, given this wider structure of feeling which encapsulates both emergency and indecision? Where can it work to help "collect up the trash of the Anthropocene", re-use the "exterminism of the Capitalocene", and contribute to a "much hotter compost pile for still possible pasts, presents, and futures" (Haraway, 2016: 56)? Are its most useful attributes a capacity for totalizing understanding and critique, undermining ideology and stimulating revolutionary change; or is it better at nurturing hopeful creativity and inspiring individuals to alter their lifestyles? Or both?

In my corner of the social sciences, the value of utopian visions is increasingly invoked as necessary to expand the imagination of the climate dilemma and the range of policy and political responses to it, especially the capacity to entertain large-scale system interconnections — perhaps even to inspire and frame action. Academics from across a range of disciplines are addressing the Dithering and the impasses of policy inaction, political anger, the Thatcherite claim that "there is no alternative" ("TINA") to neo-liberalism, and cruel optimism (Berlant, 2011). When the present seems more stuck than ever and institutional policy change stymied by post-politics, and when the most common futures projected too often pit apocalyptics against business as usual, imagined alternative visions, especially in speculative fiction, are valued increasingly highly.

Climate fiction, for example, has a power to "stimulate, aid and enrich the political imagination", according to Manjana Milkoreit. "Rather than offering novel solutions, climate fiction stories provide subtle and complex lessons concerning the intricate relationship between climate, society, economics and politics" (Milkoreit, 2016: 188). An empirical reader survey by Matthew Schneider-Mayerson shows how climate fiction "reminds concerned readers of the severity of climate change while impelling them to imagine environmental futures and consider the impact of climate change on human and nonhuman life". He proposes that, "[g]iven the gulf between environmental awareness and efficacious action, delineating novel and plausibly effective forms of cultural and political action could be an important role for environmental literature, art, and media in the coming years and decades" (2018: 473, 495). Although focused on climate fiction, these views are indicative of the extent to which the capacity to imagine otherwise and retain an element of utopianism is valued beyond the literary humanities.

Other recent research has pointed out the value of eco-utopian visions for inspiring and shaping radical activism. For example, Heather Alberro observes that "[e]coutopian works of fiction have certainly had a wide-reaching impact well beyond the realm of literary studies. … These works variedly envision and explore more socio-ecologically resilient alternatives which often permeate the public imagination in complex ways" (2020: 46). Others point to a perceived absence of radical climate visions that feel relevant. For example, in research with young activists in the north-east of England, Joe Herbert finds that negative impetuses to climate action and high levels of climate anxiety are not matched by equally powerful — detailed, compelling — radical, alternative visions. Herbert writes of "an imaginative gap between our current social reality and just and sustainable futures, driven by structural and psychological pressures faced by activists in the current era of multi-dimensional crisis" (2021: 373).

Therefore, utopia is, or could be, both a totalizing critique of the problem of climate change and a stimulus to structural change, *and* a source of personal inspiration that can nurture desires and capacities for action. This tension has always run through utopian studies. It is a tension between abstract and concrete utopia; between programme and process; desire and hope. In utopian studies, much political work has emphasized the necessity for utopian impulses and flimsy desires to be strengthened and transformed into more solid and effective hope or become concretized in utopian action. Utopian studies has also been alert to the ways in which even the best individual education of desire for something better needs to be nurtured and made collective. Although much radical political thought has conversely treated utopia as unrealistic and compensatory, utopian studies has always explored not merely how the world should be, along with the denunciatory, critical dimension of radical politics, but also the relationship between critical knowledge, understanding, and the capacity for action for change.

Perhaps it is this capacity of utopia to move constantly between visions and programmes, between system change and the desiring, practised, feeling dimension of change that makes it so valuable for discussions of the climate crisis. Because in some sense, it is between these scales — between the individual and the totalizing structure (both abstractions and fantasies in their different ways, albeit sometimes analytically valuable ones) — that utopia works. For me, utopia is best understood in the cultural circulation of alternatives, provoking and potentially transforming collective imaginaries. The expression of desire for a better way of living and being — be that in a fully blown formal utopian narrative or in everyday embedded practices of multispecies care—does something with and to us in contexts that are irreducibly social and complex.

Often this utopian function has been conceived of in terms of knowledge or cognition, predominantly in analyses of utopian and speculative literature in the tradition. Cognition matters insofar as it reflects *on* as well as being reflective *of* our realities. As Darko Suvin frames it, cognition "implies not only a *reflecting of but also on reality*. It implies a creative approach tending toward a dynamic transformation rather than toward a static mirroring of the author's environment. Such typical SF methodology … is a *critical* one" (2014: s. 2.5, italics added).

However, a utopianism of only critique, only denunciation, would risk a kind of cognition that misses the simultaneous need to attend with affective *care* to the situation of the Anthropocene. In environmental education and beyond, researchers are thinking about adaptation to climate change not only in ecosystemic or sociopolitical terms, but as a cultural and emotional adjustment to a fundamentally altered world we now inhabit; a way of "staying with the

trouble" in Haraway's terms. In this sense, utopianism must be understood not as an alternative to shared earthly realities, but as a part of their fabrics. Utopia helps us reflect *with* our realities. The value of utopianism in relation to the climate crisis then may be through affect and adaptation as much as through cognition and critique. This positions utopia in a situation of ambivalence, which is not possible in analyses of the climate crisis that already know what is wrong and what the solution is. Coming to terms with climate change and moving past the Dithering will involve approaching it not only from the outside as a systemic problem, but from the inside, as Blanche Verlie argues:

> We need stories that enable us to *identify as part of climate change*, and that enable us to *stay with the ethical and interpersonal challenges of living with it*. And we need people to be actively engaged in the composition of such stories, so that they may inhabit, diversity and disperse these ways of relating. (Verlie, 2021: 104, emphasis added)

Understanding is not simply a matter of awareness leading to knowledge and then to action in a linear way. Instead, Verlie asks: "What if we started from a different understanding of what climate is, and how we can know it? What if lived, embodied, interpersonal and relational experiences were considered constitutive of climate and as valuable ways of comprehending it?" (2021: 5).

In relation to climate change there is value in thinking through the affective, adaptive element of utopia as valuable even if this remains on the territory of contradiction and ambiguity. We "learn to live with" climate change even as we need to remain "against" its long-term planetary impacts and injustices. Relevant utopian traditions, then, might be ones that see utopia as practice, as everyday hope, as affect as well as critique. Both these dimensions come ultimately from Ernst Bloch (1986), and much effort in utopian theory has sought to understand how the everyday felt desire of utopia can be transformed into collective action and change (for example, Moylan, 2021). A lot of writing on this topic has tended to undervalue the utopian impulse unless it is translated into denunciations of the wider system and programmes of action. But on the terrain of everyday experience, practice, and potential action, these fleeting utopian affects may be equally important. It is in these traditions that we might work on the relationship between utopia, climate, and system change — in relation to a knowing/wanting/doing gap rather than necessarily a communication/knowledge/action gap.

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