Utopia: Social Theory and the Future

Henry Adam Svec

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Book review

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Review by Henry Adam Svec

The label "utopian" has often been wielded as a pejorative—it might describe one who refuses to reckon with the real, one who has one's head in the clouds. But recent reconsiderations of the concept, following from Ernst Bloch's and then Zygmunt Bauman's important work, have both historicized and opened up rich variations on our modern longing for a better place to be. As the sociologist Ruth Levitas has argued, utopia can be understood as "the expression of the desire for a better way of being" (1990, p. 8), and expressions of this vague yet potent desire have by now been traced by scholars across a range of genres and media, from Hollywood cinema to video games to philosophy to folk music to digital networks to communes and intentional communities.

The collection *Utopia: Social Theory and the Future* seeks to contribute to this well-established field of utopian studies by exploring convergences between social theory (conceived broadly) and utopia. According to editors Michael Hviid Jacobsen and Keith Tester, social theory has been utopian in at least two senses: "First, social theory historicizes the present. […] Second, […] just as hope is a theological virtue, so it is also a principle of social theory" (p. 1-2). Thus, though not all contributions here are unanimous on how utopia can or should be understood, the general direction is towards the radical, transformative promise of the concept. As Jacobsen and Tester poetically put it, "Utopia is an ambition which puts question marks against the everyday inevitability of this world and, moreover, motivates thought and action—praxis—aimed at transforming what is through the lever of what could be" (p. 1). So, how can utopian dreams steer us right? What kinds of socio-political valences can we find therein?

Part I of the book is entitled "Theoretical Musings," and authors here offer mostly close readings of social thinkers (though not exclusively academics) who grapple with utopia in their work. Henk de Berg's chapter "Utopia and the End of History" attempts to defend Francis Fukuyama's controversial theory by explaining

how the political scientist is not a utopian but a realist; we are offered a reiteration of Fukuyama's argument that Hegelian recognition is the most accomplishable ideal in civic life, which liberal democracy has a unique power to enable. Peter Thompson's contribution, "What Is Concrete about Ernst Bloch's 'Concrete Utopia'?" shifts gears away from neoliberal apologetics and towards the Marxist tradition, exploring Ernst Bloch's "concrete utopia" as a productively dialectical struggle with and against the broader social totality. Arpad Szakolczai's "Dreams, Visions and Utopias – Romantic and Realist Revolutionaries and the Idyllic" covers an almost endless territory of topics, touching on Gregory Bateson's and Reinhard Koselleck's concepts of "schismogenesis" and "pathogenesis" respectively, offering readings of four of Shakespeare's plays, explicating the work of Hungarian essayist Bela Hamvas, and closing with a discussion of Paleolithic cave art. Michael Hviid Jacobsen's chapter on Zygmunt Bauman offers a useful survey of the prolific theorist's evolving understanding of utopia in modern and postmodern societies. Finally, Anders Petersen and Michael Hviid Jacobsen explore the social-theoretical strength of the novels of Michel Houellebecq, whose dystopian fictions, they argue, help us to critique both "liquid" modern societies and sociological descriptions thereof.

Moving away from theory per se, Part II seeks to dig into the murkier area of social practice. Peter Young excavates the utopian dimension of the discipline of criminology, a welcome and, as the author points out, unexpected move. Kate Rigby, in "Utopianism, Dystopianism and Ecological Thought," probes the ecological sides of the utopian tradition, suggesting that both utopian and dystopian visions can make manifest the rising stakes of climate change, though she also considers how not all utopias are created equal. And Andrew Jamison's "Social Movements in Utopian Practice" charts transformations in social movements that have dealt with environmental justice, focusing on the Danish context. He argues that the utopianism of the social movements of the 1970s can be renewed to combat both corporatization and anti-environmentalism, which have posed a challenge.

The final two chapters will perhaps be of most interest to the current reader. In "Virtual Utopias and Dystopias – The Cultural Imaginary of the Internet," Majid Yar argues that digital utopianism and dystopianism both have roots in the West's double-edged response to modernization: "[…] Our culture imagines the Internet as a space in which either the unfulfilled promises of modernity might finally be realized (liberation, self-transformation, solidarity, equality) or one in which such dreams find their final dissolution as the humanist vision is lost in a realm of technological hybridization, alienation, and domination" (p. 180). And Jensen and Freudendal-Pedersen's "Utopias of Mobilities" reads the work of two historical collectives, Archigram and the Situationist International, then probes a contemporary Danish architectural firm, BIG, in light of this history. Jensen and

Freudendal-Pedersen give particular attention to BIG's Loop City project, and their book *Yes is More*. They consider these works to be examples of the "wild contemporary," which playfully articulates critical urbanism with speed and techno-futurism.

One strength of this collection is the openness of its editorial vision. Because the return to utopia in the social sciences and humanities has often seemed to be the privileged territory of the left, beginning a book with an essay on Fukuyama is perhaps a call to arms, an invitation to expand and multiply our utopianisms across and beyond the political spectrum. The editors have also done an admirable job of bringing together such a range of approaches to utopian social theory—fiction, digital networks, and models of urban mobility are all invoked as implicit theories of society. Further, more than a few of these essays make important contributions to the field of utopian studies. Young admirably condenses Zygmunt Bauman's sprawling output into a coherent narrative. Thompson gives us a useful articulation of Bloch's rich but frustrating work, helping us to see the difficult concept "concrete utopia" in a new light. And both Riby's and Jamison's explorations of the climatological and ecological aspects of contemporary utopianism are urgent.

Yet, though several of the chapters are well argued and provocative, the collection as a whole is perhaps uneven. De Berg's essay on Fukuyama does not do justice to the rich alternative social theories that oppose "liberal democracy." "Communists like to think [that liberal democracy still has any ideological competitors], of course, and we shall return to their perspective in the next section (p. 18)," de Berg promises. Slavoj Zizek is then held up as an exemplar of the contemporary left, a field that is in fact richly and complicatedly heterogenous. What about Michael Hardt's and Antonio Negri's utopian theory of "multitude" (2000), to cite just one example? And Szakolczai perhaps bites off more than can be chewed in a short essay, rushing from anthropological concepts to several of Shakespeare's masterworks to cave art, without managing to tie cogently these wanderings together. And, after a stimulating explication of digital utopianism's socio-cultural causes, one of Yar's conclusions is that, "The avenues for computer-mediated communication are thus no different in kind from their non-computer mediated counterparts" (p. 192), and thus "there is nothing intrinsically degrading or dehumanizing in virtual relations" (p. 192). We might accept the latter point with qualification at the same time that we recognize and strive to understand better the *medium-specific* differences between various utopian expressions.

Still, even if a few of these essays might have deserved further refinement, parts of *Utopia: Social Theory and the Future* will be worth a look for anyone interested in the swelling energy of utopian studies. Alongside Ruth Levitas's recent *Utopia as Method: The Imaginary Reconstitution of Society* (2013), *Utopia: Social*

Theory and the Future pushes us to understand the complicated and necessarily promising reverberations in the field of social theory between the way things are and the way things might yet be.

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