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Article:

Webb, D. (2020) The Domestication of Utopia and the Climate Crisis. *MediAzioni : Rivista Online di Studi Interdisciplinari su Lingue e Culture*, 27. ISSN: 1974-4382

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The Domestication of Utopia and the Climate Crisis

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Citation: Webb, Darren (2020), "The Domestication of Utopia and the Climate Crisis", *mediAzioni* 27: D6-D16. <http://mediazioni.sitlec.unibo.it>, ISSN 1974-4382.

Utopia was once a marginal field of study. Conferences like this were safe spaces in which utopian scholars, often regarded as odd balls dallying at the fringes of our respective disciplines, could gather and find community. The community of scholars provided a breathing space in which the spirit of utopia was kept alive (as beautifully recounted by Jacobs 2007).

This is now an outdated image. Utopia is no longer a fringe concern. Within mainstream academic journals, Utopia is frequently heralded as a valuable method, approach and framework (see Webb 2009; 2016). Within mainstream media, Utopia is no longer referred to in pejorative terms. It is taken seriously. Popular newspapers run series in which journalists and commentators offer "utopian thinking for our times" (Guardian, 2017). Utopia is mainstream now.

While this *seems* to point to a welcome rehabilitation of utopia, what we have seen here in fact is its recuperation. Utopia has been rehabilitated in recuperated form. The subversive, counter-hegemonic thrust of utopia has been tamed and rendered fit for domestic life within the established order. A once dangerous creature has become a domesticated pet.

Much of what passes today as "utopian thinking" is indistinguishable from Popper's "piecemeal engineering" (Popper 1966: 157-8). Utopia has lost its radical transformative edge as minor reforms are being paraded as situationally

transcendent ideas. Where once we saw transformative visions pointing beyond the present order being *derided* as utopian, we now see proposals for moderate reform being *heralded* as utopian (see Webb 2016 for examples). A number of concepts describe what is going on here: capitalist realism (Fisher 2009), the privatisation of hope (Thompson 2013) and the crisis of negation (Van Houdt 2011) to name but a few. What I want to argue, however, is that the field of utopian studies itself has been complicit in this stunting of the utopian imagination.

A key date here is 1989, when the association between utopia and totalitarianism was being hammered home with great ideological force following the fall of actually existing socialism. One of the reasons why this association took hold so firmly in the popular imagination is that there was no concerted attempt to challenge it. E.P. Thompson described the western left at the time as “a kind of profoundly pessimistic self-flagellant chorus,” uncritically conceding the association between utopian visions and totalitarian politics (Thompson 1991: 107).

To be sure, articles appeared “in defence of utopia” (Singer 1993; Zeitlin 1996). Crucially, however, these defences *redefined* the utopia they were defending. The left was so keen to distance itself from a certain understanding of utopia that it redefined it as something less threatening. No longer a vision of an alternative system that can inspire people and mobilise change, because that was the kind of utopia associated with totalitarianism. Rather, the utopia being defended in the defences of utopia was utopia conceived as partial, provisional and particular, a flexible open-ended process, a thought experiment, a heuristic device.¹

This has subsequently become concretised as the dominant understanding of utopia within the field of utopian studies. Of course, it has not gone unchallenged. Ruth Levitas has warned tirelessly of the dangers associated with Utopia understood primarily in terms of process or partiality (Levitas 1990; 2013). But this has nonetheless remained the dominant tone. Utopia as open, partial,

¹ The redefining of “utopia” that took place during the 1990s can be traced through “defences” such as those offered by Singer (1993) and Zeitlin (1996) through to the radical repurposing offered by Sargisson (1996).

provisional, localised. And this has led to exalted utopian claims being made on behalf of all manner of modest proposals, ideas and practices that are simply not utopian at all. The retreat from totalising thinking has been so severe, so absolute, that provisional piecemeal reforms assume the status of radical utopian plans and utopia collapses into ameliorative tinkering.²

Accompanying this has been the domestication of Ernst Bloch. As we all know, Bloch is the touchstone for countless studies which point to and celebrate traces of utopian hope to be found in the fabric of everyday life. An ever-growing number of conference papers take as their focus a television programme, a pulp novel, a playground, a piece of music, fashion design, gaming, the performativity of a play, and use Bloch as a means of uncovering the traces of hope to be found there. But no project is suggested, no politics stems from these studies, no course of action is developed. Traces of hope are simply pointed to or pointed at.³

Such depoliticised gestures were completely alien to Bloch's own work, which most definitely *was* a project and most definitely *had* a politics. The project was to demonstrate the centrality of hope and utopia to the warm stream of Marxism and the politics was revolutionary communism. As compromised and as suspect as Bloch's own position often was, one can barely make sense of his study of Front, Novum, the Not-Yet, abstract and concrete utopia other than through his project and his politics (Levitas 1997).⁴ And yet so much work invokes Bloch in

² As starkly exemplified in the Real Utopias Project. While there is much to admire in E. O. Wright's conceptual formulation of this project (Wright 2010; 2012), the six volumes collected under the project's heading and published between 1995-2009 stand as testimony to the thorough domestication of "utopia."

³ This has become an increasing feature of many conferences, to the point where all a paper has to do to qualify as "utopian" scholarship is make some passing reference to Bloch. A depoliticised Bloch is also present within more robust and sustained studies, however. For example, in *Green Utopias* Lisa Garforth adopts an explicitly Blochian understanding of utopia as processual and grounded in the everyday but then makes the double move of first rejecting Bloch's communism (11) and then distancing herself from politics itself (157-8).

⁴ David Kaufmann (1997: 33) rightly highlights the "suspect Stalinist commitments" running through Bloch's writings and Tom Moylan (1997: 115) points to the "emotional blindness" underpinning Bloch's "uncritical support of Stalinism."

order to offer a reading of utopia which reduces it to little more than a series of free-floating ephemeral glimpses.⁵

Within utopian studies, then, one has a domesticated reading of utopia as partial, provisional, ad hoc realism, operating in localised contexts or within specific institutions. And one has a domesticated reading of utopia as a trace of hope to be found in a thing or a moment. Utopia as social realism and utopia as glimmer in the darkness. I am not suggesting that these readings of utopia are *wrong*. Just that they are domesticated. Structures of power have nothing to fear from them. I am also suggesting that utopian studies is becoming a *self*-domesticating field. Utopian scholars – accepting without question the ideological coupling of totalising and totalitarian – have redefined utopia in ways that have tamed it, enabling it to sit quietly at the feet of the existing order of things.

Which makes the theme of this conference so welcome and so significant. Because it will test the limits of utopia in its domesticated forms. Neither the partial provisionality of utopian realism nor the fleeting ephemerality of glimpses in the darkness are up to the task of addressing the climate crisis. Depoliticised readings of Bloch are not going to save us, nor are realist accommodations to the politics of adaptation and mitigation. Partial, provisional, fleeting, ad hoc utopianism is no good, a romanticisation of open-ended process is not fit for purpose, appeals to social realism will get us nowhere.⁶

⁵ A very similar thing has happened to Paolo Freire. Freire's problem-posing education is impossible to understand other than through his Marxism and radical Christianity. Far too often, however, key ideas or concepts are extracted from his works (e.g. dialogue) and paraded as "methods." Freire has thus been emptied of political content and domesticated in the form of methods and approaches such as inquiry-based learning. As with Freire, the domestication of Bloch sees his "method" (locating a utopian surplus) being extracted from his project, with predictably asinine results. Indeed, the disjuncture between utopian studies and a politics of utopia has widened as the darkness of the lived moment has become ever darker. If, in Gramscian terms, the present juncture can be read as an interregnum in which the old world is dying but the shape of the new world remains as yet opaque, then a desperation has filled this void as utopian scholars search for sparks of hope and find them anywhere and everywhere. Levitas long ago complained of the tendency to emphasise the celebratory aspects of Bloch's work at the expense of the critical (Levitas 1997), but this tendency for uncritical celebration has now become almost a constitutive feature of the field.

⁶ Gregory Claeys (2013) makes a plea for us to understand utopia in terms of "social realism," suggesting modestly that utopia offers a "plausible" vision of a "more optimal" outcome. In a paper

So what would a *non-domesticated* utopian response to the climate crisis entail? I will offer three provocations here.

Firstly, I embrace David Bell's (2017) understanding of utopianism as imminent praxis. Utopianism is an active process of creation, not just imaginatively but materially. It demands utopia here and now. Utopia is not just a literary form, or a heuristic device, or a thought experiment, it's the here-and-now active production of place. A utopian response to the climate crisis is thus an *activist* response, encouraging participation in, for example, communal projects of mutual aid (Frase 2019).

Secondly, utopians need to stop fleeing the notion of totality. Of course, the present is never fully self-present and the social totality evades full representation. However, this does not render it any less urgent or any less necessary to map this totality – a totality that's always shifting, always in process, always already unstable – for the purposes of analysis, critique and utopian figuration. Engaging with the climate crisis requires totalising critique. This not only links the climate crisis to logics of accumulation but also links its uneven impact to logics of colonialism and state violence (Sealey-Huggins 2017). The experience of Extinction Rebellion demonstrates very clearly what happens when an ostensibly utopian movement *lacks* a totalising critique and ends up reproducing classed and racialised logics of separation, exclusion and repression (Cowan, 2019; Punkadamic, 2019; Wretched of the Earth, 2019).⁷

written from an activist perspective and explicitly urging utopian praxis, Sheryl Medicott (2019) defines this praxis in terms of “fostering the utopian imagination and the ability to think differently” as “a process and not an end goal.” I am suggesting here that neither of these utopian approaches is adequate to the challenge presented by the climate crisis.

⁷ While successfully raising the profile of the climate crisis to record levels (all credit due), XR has a deeply problematic structural analysis (a Malthusian attitude towards population growth and an eco-nationalist approach to migration and border controls) and just as problematic a range of tactics (the glaring middle-class white privilege underpinning the tactic of encouraging arrests and presenting this as harmless “opportunity for reflection,” and the much-criticised love of the police [“the police are good guys too”]). While the tactic of mass protest was initially successful, XR has morphed into a lobby group with a growing number of ethically troubling wings – XR Business, XR Police, XR Landlords.

With regards to utopian figuration, this needs to be understood as a Program in Fredric Jameson's (2005) terms.⁸ Rather than signalling a descent into totalitarianism, however, a dialectical interplay exists between Program and Impulse. Bringing David Harvey (2000) into the conversation here, one might say that while processual Impulse gives Utopia its life and dynamism, Program is what inserts Utopia into the political sphere. And while Impulse prevents the hypostatisation of any given Program, Program prevents processual utopianism from getting lost in the romanticism of open-ended possibilities.⁹

Kim Stanley Robinson (2018a) is right when he says that we need *global* solutions to the climate crisis as a *global* problem. Local community building is necessary but insufficient. Robinson's own brand of explicitly statist democratic socialism may rankle with some.¹⁰ However, a non-domesticated utopian response to the climate crisis must take Robinson's framing premise – that this is a global problem requiring a global solution – seriously, with all the totalising systems thinking that entails.

There is a real danger here that utopian studies will become calcified, ossified, as others take on the challenge of utopian politics. A growing body of research within the behavioural sciences is focusing on utopian thinking for planetary health (Basso and Krpan forthcoming; Fazey *et al* 2018; Fernando *et al* 2018; Fernando *et al* 2019; Prescott and Logan 2018). Research teams are developing scales to measure peoples' levels of utopian thinking and they aim to create guidelines for educators and activists advising how best to stimulate the utopian impulse and effect social change. Much of their work is staggeringly, frighteningly

⁸ Jameson (2005: 3-5) distinguishes between utopian Program (totalising, systemic utopian texts, programmes and communities intent on utopia's enactment and realisation) and a more vague, obscure yet omnipresent utopian Impulse.

⁹ I think Harvey's discussion of "The utopian moment" in Part 3 of *Spaces of Hope* (2000) is not referred to enough within utopian studies. Jameson, for example, does not once refer to Harvey in the newly written sections of *Archaeologies* (2005), even as he treads over the same ground.

¹⁰ Robinson (2018a; 2018b) explicitly rejects anarchism, horizontalism and libertarian communism in favour of statism and democratic socialism. He talks not only of the need to seize the mechanisms of the state but also for this to happen on a global scale, placing hope in a radical transformation of the IMF, World Bank and WTO.

crude, but the point is that while utopian studies stands still, paralysed by fear of totalising discourse, other fields move on and assume the mantle of utopia's champions.

Thirdly, finally, and most provocatively perhaps, the term that best describes a non-domesticated utopianism and a politics of transformative change is communism. There is no solution to climate change that leaves capitalism intact. The climate crisis demands that capitalism, its institutions, logics and compulsions, be torn apart (Bernes 2019). A utopian politics worthy of the name needs to abandon its attachment to accommodationist notions of realism. We tear the world apart to create the world anew. As McKenzie Wark (2019) puts it – and I will end with this quote – “It’s no longer socialism or barbarism, it’s communism or extinction.”¹¹

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¹¹ I think it important to emphasise at this juncture communism as *discontinuity*. This is because so much contemporary communist writing stresses the *continuity* between capitalism and communism, the mere acceleration of the *is* until it becomes the *ought*, so that communism is reduced to little more than universal access to goods and things – Bastani (2019) being the obvious case in point. Three things are worth saying. Firstly, communism is to be understood – obviously – as a mode of production, one structured around common ownership, the free association of producers and distribution according to need rather than private ownership, wage labour and commodity production. Secondly, and just as importantly, communism needs to be understood as transformed social relations, a new form of life, a structure of feeling centring love, care, solidarity, community, cooperation, empathy, dignity, mutuality (all the things missing from Bastani’s manifesto). Communism is a process of resubjectification; human subjectivity is transformed in and through the process of transforming society. Thirdly, communism, if it is anything at all, is collective action, collective struggle, on multiple fronts and across multiple sites. Although I am not keen on the term Multitude to describe collective subject(ivity), it is as good a term as any to describe such a promising grouping as Wretched of the Earth (a collective of 47 international anarcho-libertarian communist grassroots movements).

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