This is a repository copy of *Immanent pedagogy and Utopia now!*.

White Rose Research Online URL for this paper:
https://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/146791/

Version: Accepted Version

Article:

Immanent Pedagogy and Utopia Now!

David M. Bell. *Rethinking Utopia: Place, Power, Affect*. **New York, Routledge, 2017, pp.178 ISBN 978-1-138-89133-3**

In this book David Bell 'rethinks' utopia in three significant ways. Firstly, he reclaims the centrality of *place* to any understanding of utopia, responding to both the 'topophobes' who conceive utopia as a placeless desire, impulse or process and those who view utopia as primarily a literary rather than spatial form. Secondly, he shifts the *temporality* of utopia from the future to the present. Finally, he *repoliticises* utopia as a project. This makes it a particularly welcome intervention in a field of studies that is becoming ever more conservative at a time when radical utopian politics is needed more than ever.

There is a lot going on in the book. For anyone with an interest in the field, Chapter Three offers an excellent review of recent developments and approaches to the study of utopia(nism). Chapter Two, meanwhile, surveys both contemporary far right and contemporary left utopianisms, offering some interesting reflections on various visions of a post-work future. These two chapters are set against the positioning of the present in Chapter One as a 'critical dystopia', a dystopian place reproduced through relations of domination but within which pockets of utopian resistance and hope have not been entirely eradicated. Bell's approach is eclectic throughout, an admixture of political theory, critical geography and literary criticism, bringing Deleuze and Spinoza, Massey and Harvey, Zamyatin and Le Guin into fruitful conversation with each other.

One complaint is the format of the book. Each chapter has its own Bibliography and over a quarter of the book's pages comprise end-of-chapter Notes and (repetitious) Bibliographies, making a short book even shorter and giving the whole thing a cumbersome über-academic feel. This is a shame because there is gold to be found in the pages. I concur fully with Bell's critique of 'topophobic' trends within contemporary theory which present 'a utopianism without utopia' and thus rid utopia of its conceptual specificity (5). I welcome the fact that Bell engages with contemporary left politics, and with considerations of power, freedom, democracy and the state, not as academic objects of study but as matters of political urgency. And Bell's prose is occasionally beautiful—recounting the moment he fell in love with free jazz and started to feel the joy of utopia within it (157-8)—and often precise. His discussion of utopia and identity (14) could scarcely have been expressed with greater clarity, concision and force.

The word 'utopia' is normally translated as 'the good place' (eu-topos) that is 'no place' (ou-topos). Bell deconstructs this and breaks the concept down into three constituent parts, no-good-place. Utopia is conceived as a 'place' in the sense of a space made meaningful by the intra-actions taking place within it. These intra-actions are 'good' if they increase the capacities of bodies to affect and be affected. At the same time utopia always says 'no' to the present and acts as a force of refusal and undoing. For Bell, 'utopia is a place produced through the intra-action of the 'good' and the 'no': a ceaseless oscillation between affirmation and negation' (170). Utopia*nism* is then defined as a materially grounded force and process through which utopia emerges, the political terrain of which is the present not the future. Bell argues repeatedly for utopianism as a form of immanent praxis. The demand is No Future, Utopia Now! (63).

Bell suggests that radical experiments in education offer small-scale examples of such immanent praxis, of no-good-place-making. He argues that utopian praxis in the classroom 'is a dynamic form that is (re)produced and changed through pedagogic intra-actions' (100). A possibility *within* as well as outside the formal education system, schools and classrooms

can become no-good-places through 'the configuration of educational space' (101). Drawing on Deleuze's reading of Spinoza's ethics, Bell regards pedagogic intra-actions to be 'good' if they maximise the capacities of all 'to affect and be affected' (or, phrased differently, to fully exercise their power-to) (107). These intra-actions must always also invite the utopian 'no', so 'openness to disagreement and conflict is vital in an educational setting' (111), including (and especially) the freedom to challenge the operation of privilege and power (152).

What kind of pedagogic intra-actions maximise the capacities of all to affect and be affected? Bell is good here on stressing the communal basis of individual freedom and flourishing, arguing that bodies coming together in assemblage maximise the capacity for intra-actions and thus the capacity for individuality (112). For the most part, he draws his concepts and arguments from the field of critical pedagogy: the need for dialogue, the sharing of lived experiences, attunement to the specificities of embodied identity and histories of resistance, connection to the issues facing the communities within which the schools and classrooms are embedded (108-20). Through such intra-actions, Bell argues, subjectivities are transformed, possibilities for other-becomings are opened up and students and teachers start engaging with how the world might be transformed.

I have every sympathy with Bell's emphasis on utopia as immanent praxis – I have written elsewhere about my own involvement in attempts to create utopia now (Webb, 2017). I do regard this, however, as merely one of utopia's many faces rather than utopia *per se*. While striving wherever we can to create utopia now, we need at the same time—as Kim Stanley Robinson has persuasively argued— to be working toward a global solution (Robinson, 2018). This is not the place, of course, for an extended discussion of political strategy. It is enough to note that Bell's utopia-rethought is worked consistently into an interstitial anarchist politics:

> the task for utopians is to look at a map of the world and identify where the utopias are; think through what makes them utopian; and think through how to intensify them so that they expand both qualitatively and quantitatively (63).

What, then, makes the utopias identified by Bell utopian? Radical experiments in education are deemed utopian because enabling bodies to come together in assemblage, sharing their experiences, hopes and fears while calling out power when they see it, creates 'new possibilities' for the learning bodies (115) and 'creates the future as an open, yet-to-be-determined space unfolding from the here-and-now' (11). A striking feature of Bell's discussion of education is that the role of the educator is barely mentioned. It seems to be assumed that bodies coming together in dialogue will ground an organic pedagogical dynamism. As Freire noted long ago, however:

> dialogue is not a 'free space' where you say what you want. Dialogue takes place inside some program and content. To achieve the goals of transformation, dialogue implies responsibility, directiveness, determination, discipline, objectives (Freire and Shor, 1987, 102)

Without programme, content and directiveness, 'dialogue' risks becoming an empty and ultimately ossified space. I fear there is a danger of this in Bell's educational utopias. He tells us, for example, that 'utopianism is a form of prefigurative utopianism, but it is doubly/infinitely so, for it is not prefigurative of any final form but rather of further prefiguration' (123). This is an interesting formulation. However, if our intra-actions in the no-good-place merely prefigure the conditions necessary for further prefiguration, does not this run the risk of depoliticising utopia once more? As David Harvey argues, utopia shorn of vision and goal (final form) remains 'a pure signifier of hope destined never to acquire a

material referent', an infinitely circulating self-referential process that has 'the habit of getting lost in the romanticism of endlessly open projects' (Harvey, 2000, 189, 174). It feels to me that at times Bell's utopia(nism) comes close to the 'utopianism without utopia' he rightly critiques.

There is so much, however, to recommend this book. It provides a corrective to recent literature which positions utopia as a placeless desire or impulse, and it builds on, critiques and pushes further the literature which regards utopia as a heuristic device or method. In repurposing utopianism as immanent praxis and in calling for Utopia Now, Bell's book infuses utopian scholarship with the political urgency it has long been lacking. I have some reservations regarding the way in which radical experiments in education are presented as examples of immanent utopian praxis but I share the broader political framing. Providing another corrective to recent work in the field, this time to scholars who reduce utopia to little more than a project of pragmatic reform, Bell rightly points to the term that best describes our struggles and our utopianism – the term is communism (143).

References

Freire, P. and Shor, I. 1987. *A Pedagogy for Liberation*. Basingstoke: Macmillan.

Harvey, D. 2000. Spaces of Hope. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Robinson, K. S. 2018. The Realism of Our Time. *Radical Philosophy* 2.01: https://www.radicalphilosophy.com/interview/the-realism-of-our-time

Webb, D. 2017. Utopia in Sheffield? We Have to Start Somewhere. *OpenDemocracy* 28 June: https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/transformation/utopia-in-sheffield-we-have-to-start-somewhere/