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Pedagogy, politics and the formation of the utopian subject

Becoming utopian: the culture and politics of radical transformation, by Tom Moylan, London, Bloomsbury Academic, 2021, 300 pp, £85 (hbk), ISBN 978-1-3501-3333-4

For those working in the field of utopian studies, Tom Moylan needs no introduction. His first book, *Demand the Impossible* (Moylan, 1986), helped define the field as it was taking shape during the 1980s and '90s. The concept of "critical utopia" introduced in that book—and his subsequent work with Raffaella Baccolini on critical dystopias (Baccolini and Moylan, 2003; Moylan, 2000)—has become one of the most influential analytical frames for the study of contemporary utopian literature. *Becoming Utopian* is Moylan's third book and different in kind than his previous two. Whereas *Demand the Impossible* and *Scraps of the Untainted Sky* were monographs focused very tightly on exploring utopian and dystopian literature, *Becoming Utopian* is a collection of essays spanning thirty years (book-ended by a new opening chapter and a lengthy concluding interview) dealing more broadly with politics and pedagogy.

Moylan's primary concern in the book is what he terms "the formation of the utopian subject" (15) or "the utopian creation of radical new subjects" (227). Animating his exploration of this process is the fundamental question of the extent to which the "utopian turn" (5), utopian break or "gestalt shift" (8), requires pedagogical intervention. Early in the Introduction, he refers to the importance of "the process of a utopian education" in the formation of radicalised subjects (10). This then raises key questions of what, when, why and who? These questions are approached from two angles. The first is literary and focuses on the pedagogical operation of utopian science fiction. The second is socio-political and explores the process of utopian education as it plays out within organising groups of various kinds. Both are important and given careful consideration. In fact, one of the things that comes through the pages of this book is its embodiedness. Moylan does not write as a detached utopian scholar dispassionately surveying an academic field. When he talks about the pedagogical potential of utopian science fiction, or the necessary work of community organising, a long personal history, and a wider political project, are evoked. This is an academic text that is also a personal political intervention, and so much more powerful and engaging for it.

The central section of the book—chapters 4, 5 and 6 –focuses on literature and what Moylan variously refers to as the pedagogical potential (107), provocation (108), function (110) and vocation (113) of utopian science fiction. Much of this is bread and butter to utopian scholars, "the sf protocol of worldbuilding, cognitive estrangement, consciousness-raising, and paradigm shifting" (107). Two aspects of Moylan's discussion, however, are worth signalling as especially important. The first, argued forcefully in Chapter 5, is the pedagogical significance of positive utopian content. It says a lot about the state of utopian studies as a field that so much energy and persuasive force needs to be put into defending and asserting the pedagogical value of utopia's positive hermeneutic; on highlighting that a focus on negation, disruption, process and figuration, is not enough; that crucial pedagogical work is performed by representation and content; that the utopian hermeneutic requires the continuous critical dialectical interplay of NOT ONLY impulse BUT ALSO programme; NOT ONLY denunciation BUT ALSO annunciation.

A couple of times in the book Moylan refers to the pedagogical operation of utopian science fiction as akin to the subtle knife in Pullman's *His Dark Materials* (25, 127). This then leads to the second aspect of his discussion of utopian literature that I think is important, which is his analysis of the ways in which utopian texts simultaneously tap into and help construct particular structures of feeling. This is what enables them to function as a subtle knife and this is what links the central

chapters of the book, from the discussion in Chapter 4 of Darko Suvin's reading of the utopian *novum*, which "has revolutionary effect only if it functions in relationship to the changing, historically specific structures of feeling out of which it develops" (93), through to the detailed study of Kim Stanley Robinson in Chapter 6 which suggests that the pedagogical power of Robinson's work—it's capacity to "pull readers forward" (162)—lies in the way he "creates a structure of feeling that enables a dialogue between present conditions and future possibilities" (136). I would have liked more on this—more on what Moylan sees as the particular structures of feeling that writers like Robinson and China Miéville speak to, are expressive of and help shape—because it is here, in giving form to what is already historically known and felt by readers, albeit hazily, confusedly, inchoately, that (for me at least) utopian texts acquire both their material grounding and pedagogical power.

Moving on now to Moylan's second approach to exploring pedagogies of utopian becoming, here he looks at "the function of the utopian impulse in actual political work" (189). Returning to the key question posed at the beginning of this review—whether the formation of utopian subjectivities requires pedagogical mediation—Moylan does not shy away from arguing that yes, indeed, it does. Not only the mediation of writers and texts giving utopian form to amorphous structures of feeling, but the daily grind kind of mediation of workers on the ground.

In terms of the process of utopian education, the process of nurturing, cultivating, and empowering utopian subjectivities, of bringing them forward into full self-awareness (8), for Moylan this is best achieved within organised movements. In chapters 1, 3 and 8 he presents examples of the kind of movements he has in mind – the Christian base communities of liberation theology, the adult literacy circles associated with Freirean critical pedagogy, the community organising groups coordinated by Saul Alinsky in 1930s Chicago. As Moylan puts it, these organised groupings overcame the binary opposition between grassroots defiance and Party discipline, reconciling, as it were, Luxembourg and Lenin (195). Within these movements, at the intersection of individual and collective, engaged in a problem posing interrogation of the material conditions of daily life, tapping the political unconscious, locating the utopian surplus born of experiences of exteriority, excavating dangerous histories and constructing forward looking memories from the experiences of past struggles; it is here that "a materially grounded utopian politics…the education of desire" takes place (201).

This opens up a number of thorny questions, one of which is this: what is it about the educators in these movements that equips them to perform their educative roles? Because although the acts of learning and knowing taking place here are grounded firmly in lived experiences, there are figures in these movements performing explicitly pedagogical roles: the community leaders within liberation theology's base communities who engage in consciousness raising (77); the organisers within Alinsky's model who move into an area, learn the problems faced there, identify local leaders, educate then catalyze them (155); the radical educators within Freirean pedagogy who guide and steer the process of dialogue (198-9). What is it about these figures that grants them pedagogical license, gives them pedagogical authority? This seems to me an important question opened up by the book, a question fundamental to the collective process of becoming utopian.

In the book's newly written Introduction, Moylan explores the vital intersection of individual and collective. It is made clear here that the process of "becoming utopian" will be different for each individual, the consequence in each case of a particular "dynamic amalgam of experiences" (13). What is also made clear, though, is the necessity of understanding individual becoming only in terms of a wider collective project. As Moylan puts it: "This collective movement rises out of each person

and is informed by each, even as they are formed by that movement" (14). This is nicely worded and the Introduction provides a new perspective from which to engage with the older chapters on liberation theology, critical pedagogy and community organising because one can see the dialectic of I and we at play in Moylan's readings of these movements. This I-We dialectic, and the pedagogical relations inscribed within the process of becoming utopian, provide tools, perhaps, for thinking through our own involvement in community groups and political movements. Which is no small thing to take away from an ostensibly academic text. I have been arguing for years that the field of utopian studies needs to be politically engaged, is irrelevant if it is not, and what Moylan gives us in this book is a politically charged exploration of the individual and collective process of Becoming Utopian. This is the kind of book that utopian studies needs.

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