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For Utopian Planning

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The dominant cultural orientation towards the future in most late capitalist societies seems marked by pessimism. We know that things can't go on as they are. Every day we're burning through more of our fossilised past to prolong an inequitable and literally unsustainable present. Extractive and predatory, capitalism drives uneven development, locking societies onto ever more dangerous pathways that threaten the futures of life on earth. Put simply, if we keep doing what we're doing we're pretty much fucked[1]. Some of us will, of course, be more fucked than others. The most fucked of all will most often be those least responsible for the mess and they will have the least power to do anything about it.

Given all that it might not be surprising that our imaginations seem haunted by dystopian images. Or that, even as policymakers increasingly talk the talk of transformation, there is cynicism that real change is possible. One of the key political challenges of the present is therefore to restore belief that societies can intentionally remake their futures, not only to avert catastrophe but to create conditions for life to flourish. This involves wresting control of the means of producing the future from the grip of the capitalist realists who claim there is no alternative to the neoliberal status quo.

The urban will necessarily be a crucial locus for any future-orientated political programme and just transitions will need to be planned transitions. If, as part of this wider politics, urban planning aspires to 'organise hope' in and against forces of pessimism and cynicism, however, then it has to show how societies can collectively imagine alternative urban worlds very different to our present and demonstrate that there are pathways towards their realisation.

Calls for a more imaginative form of planning sometimes look back to the urban utopias of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries for inspiration (Fishman, 1982). However, the histories of utopianism and planning have both become associated with the dangers of insensitively imposing change on the rich relational ecologies that constitute lifeworlds. The historical ties between thinking about planning, ideal cities and the utopian tradition have therefore frayed over recent decades. Frederic Jameson, a leading figure in critical utopian theory, suggests a wider loss of faith in progress underpins this and asks whether: "the architects and urbanists [are] still passionately at work on utopian cities? (Jameson, 2010, 21-22)

[1] This is the only technical term that fully captures our current predicament.

In this piece I want to argue that attempts to revive utopian planning might start by reconnecting with wider currents and developments in utopian thinking. Drawing on debates about the value of 'utopia as method' I will speculate on ways of reimagining planning through the role it might play in '*educating desir*e' as part of the struggle for very different (and less fucked) futures.

From Anti-utopia to the Education of Desire

The term utopia has a complex history. Its popular connotations are often negative, conceived as either a hopeless fantasy or a potentially dangerous blueprint that only authoritarian measures could realise. But these are accusations most frequently made by those opposed to the idea that a better society can be planned at all. In this sense they are both powerfully anti-utopian and anti-planning. Anti-utopianism is related to the dystopian mood I discussed above but it's not the same thing. Dystopias are representations of bad places, anti-utopianism is a wider political aversion to utopias or utopianism in general (Sargent, 2006).

Anti-utopianism often works to reinforce the hegemony of dominant powers by insisting that actually existing worlds are the best we can hope for, and that imagining other possible arrangements is either a waste of time or downright dangerous. Anti-utopianism therefore plays a part in fomenting cynicism about prospects for change. It is not just an idea either but a material force sustained by the violence of capitalism and the precarity, insecurity and vulnerability it generates (Bell, 2018).

In response to prevailing anti-utopianism, much utopian scholarship argues for an anti-anti-utopianism as a minimum necessary response to attempts to shut down the utopian imagination (Jameson 2005). Understood like this, anti-utopian dismissals of utopianism need to be resisted as attempts to suppress political imagination and desire for change.

As Lyman Tower Sargent (2006) argues, all societies produce 'social dreams' and these can play an important part in stimulating the imagination, framing expectations and motivating action. Any project to transform society requires ways of imagining, constructing and critiquing alternative worlds. The forms such social dreams take, and the themes they engage, shift over time and across space, emerging not just in fictional forms but as political theories, social movements and in various pre-figurative practices inspired by the desire to live differently (Sargent 2006).

The utopian imagination can be (and frequently) is flawed, of course. It is hard to convincingly imagine alternative worlds and images of the future frequently say more about present preoccupations than they do about any desirable future state. Utopian fiction, ideas and practices have all variously reproduced colonial, racist, sexist, ablist, classist tropes. Too often

perhaps they have been the preserve of the already privileged, rather than a more organic expression of shared social dreams.

A desire to distance utopianism from its association with authoritarian blueprints has contributed to a lasting mistrust of plans in contemporary utopian studies (perhaps paralleling an equal suspicion of utopia in planning studies?). In distancing the idea of utopianism from its association with blueprints, much recent utopian scholarship focuses less on utopia as a spatio-temporal destination and more on utopia as a method for 'educating desire'. The phrase comes from Miguel Abensour's understanding of the heuristic function of utopia and was translated into English by the historian EP Thompson.

Acknowledging the contested meanings of utopia[2], Abensour has argued for an interpretation of the utopian tradition as contributing to an ongoing dialectical struggle for emancipation. For him, William Morris' 1890 novel 'News From Nowhere', published in ten instalments in the socialist periodical *Commonweal,* marked a significant shift away from utopian blueprints towards a more heuristic form of utopianism that invited people to reflect and actively participate in an exploration of desire, 'to teach desire to desire, to desire better, to desire more, and above all to desire in a different way'''(Thompson, 1977, 796. See Nadir, 2010)

For key subsequent theorists like Jameson (2005, 2010) and Ruth Levitas (2013), the function of utopianism is not to present images of fully formed future cities or societies as actual desiderata but to use such images as a means of estranging ourselves from the present. Ernst Bloch's (1995) work has been influential in this shift too (in planning see Gunder and Hillier, 2005; Ganjavie, 2015). His monumental three-volume Principle of Hope assesses the utopian traces of possible futures that might be found across any number of social practices from architecture to jazz dance (though he didn't think much of that). Bloch's work has produced a focus on an open-ended utopian analytics, based on identifying latent tendencies immanent in the present and assessing their potential to act as guiding images towards possible futures.

The shift towards a heuristic mode of utopianism significantly expands the utopian imagination. A wide range of everyday practices can be explored to examine their potential to educate desire and contribute to transformations. However, taken to extremes the turn away from detailed exploration of alternative societies or cities may itself reflect declining political faith in any *intentional* agency to remake the world (Garforth, 2009). Too much celebration of the open-ended, emergent play of immanent possibilities and too little focus on the destination may also detract from the work that is needed to imagine and construct systematic alternatives (Harvey, 2000; Levitas, 2013).

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[2] Abensour traces this back to the ambiguity in Thomas More's neologism that could be read as either eu-topia meaning good place or ou-topia, meaning no place or nowhere.

An embrace of open-ended utopian energies also creates interpretive challenges. As theorists of utopia have recognised, it means distinguishing between what Bloch called 'abstract' hope- essentially empty or even dangerous daydreams- and 'concrete' hope with genuinely transformative utopian potential. For both Bloch and Abensour, educated desire becomes 'concrete' and meaningful when it is rooted in real prospects. This doesn't mean realistic in the sense of being resigned to incremental or pragmatic solutions, however. Rather, it refers to a rootedness in the horizons, imaginations and aspirations of real struggles for a more just world order. For Bloch this was a Marxist commitment to revolution. For Abensour (2008) a radical dialectical theory of emancipation that stands against both the state and the market. Tensions between abstract and concrete hope cannot be willed away but need to be worked out in and through utopian practices. In this sense concrete hope, or educated desire, emerges in and through political movements as part of a wider cultural politics within which ideas of justice and freedom are given lived and felt meaning as horizons to work towards.

Abensour's example of William Morris and *News From Nowhere* brings this home clearly. It was written for the socialist movements Morris committed his life to and in response to the huge influence of Edward Bellamy's industrialist utopia *Looking Backward* which had horrified Morris in its depiction of a regimented future. Bellamy's novel had itself inspired the creation of hundreds of Nationalist Clubs by 'Bellamyites' across the United States. It is also widely credited as a significant influence in the development of Ebenezer Howard's garden city proposals. Positioning Howard's ideas in this way, as part of a wider movement for political reform, brings us back to planning and helps correct any tendency to see the urban utopias of the past as ahistorical products of individual genius rather than understanding how they emerged from within, and spoke back to, the broader cultural contexts and struggles that shaped their political horizons (and limitations).

So what does all of this mean for planning?

I have set out a simplified version of a complex set of debates here that are worthy of far more detailed consideration. For now, I want to point to seven reflections for planning that I hope emerge from this rapid detour through developments in utopian thinking:

1. Restoring belief that societies can intentionally transform their futures requires imagining, exploring and opening up new possible futures. The standard tools of critical and explanatory social science on which our discipline largely relies are not well suited to this task. There is a need to engage with more heterodox, speculative, creative and constructive methods, entailing a rethinking of prevailing epistemology and pedagogy. Rethinking planning's relation to utopianism can play a role in this.

2. Re-engaging planning with utopianism requires coming to terms with the ways anti-utopian thinking has influenced planning theory and practice. Despite the problematic legacies of modernist urban utopias, a commitment to transformative thinking requires a resolute commitment to an anti-anti-utopian urbanism and an anti-anti-utopian planning (as others including Leonie Sandercock (2002), John Friedmann (2000) have argued before).

3. This would require getting 'passionate' about utopian cities again. But reengaging planning with utopianism also involves moving beyond any superficial invocation of the urban utopias of the past to understand utopianism as a dynamic archive of social dreams. Understanding how the utopian tradition has developed, reflectively, in response to criticism over recent decades may provide resources for such a re-engagement.

4. The idea of 'educating desire' through the critique and construction of utopian possibilities suggests a conception of utopia as a method rather than a goal for planning, pointing towards a reflexive re-engagement with utopian urbanism as part of a pedagogy of hope. Importantly it invites us to ask whether planning as a discipline has ever engaged seriously with what it means to collectively understand, explore and act on desire for possible urban futures?

5. More than a robust anti-anti-utopian planning is it possible to catalogue an inventory of desire as a resource for remaking urban futures? This inventory could encompass everything from traces of prefigurative hope, where the new is being built in the shell of the old, through to the elaboration of systematic alternatives. It would involve opening up the planning imagination to a much wider range of resources and could itself become a valuable aid for collective exploration of desire for more just, caring and environmentally sane futures.

6. Because of the complexity of utopianism, utopian urban planning will always run multiple risks. This includes the dangers of sliding into abstract daydreams, of being harnessed to power in dangerous ways, or of revealing little more than the limits of the planning imagination. The only protection against these dangers is rigorous and ongoing debate about eu-topia, the good place (Friedmann, 2000).

7. Eu-topian hope will become concrete when it emerges organically out of, or speaks back to, real struggles, rooted in creative, collective work to educate desire, generate shared aspirations and organise hope. Less about a refounding of a planning movement or a return to the past, this might be understood as a repositioning of planning as a creative part of wider cultural and political movements capable of giving felt meaning to utopian possibilities in the face of pessimism and cynicism.

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