CHAPTER 50

Utopia

Barnita Bagchi

Utopia articulates dreams of a better life and anticipations of the future (Bloch 1986); a "social dreaming" (Claeys and Sargent 2017, pp. 1–5), the concept of utopia combines social and imaginative experimentation. The late John Urry, a leading thinker in the field of critical social futures studies, argued that when the British statesman and writer Thomas More wrote about the City of Man, rather than the City of God, in his Latin prose fiction *Utopia* (1516), he initiated a new literary genre and method for thinking futures, socially and imaginatively (Urry 2016).

Utopia does not, however, have a linear relationship to the future. Utopia, to be found articulated notably in written texts, films, other kinds of art, and socio-politically experimental movements and communities, captures the imagination of a good place, and a place which is nowhere to be found; the term enshrines paradox, ambiguity, and Janus-facedness, with a punning coupling of the good, "*eu*," and the non-existent, "*ou*," made by More in his Greek neologistic coinage "utopia." With the future referring to the time which is yet to come, the past and present commingle with imaginations of the future in unexpected, non-linear ways in utopian imagination and practice (CF. KEYWORD IMAGINATION). Such non-linearities also have ramifications across cultures and modes and relations

B. Bagchi (✉)
Comparative Literature Section, the Department of Languages, Literature, and Communication, Utrecht University, Utrecht, The Netherlands
e-mail: B.Bagchi@uu.nl

H. Paul (ed.), *Critical Terms in Futures Studies*,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-28987-4_50

of production: a primarily white Eurocentric or US-centric view of the world has often seen other cultures or peripheral, exploited systems of production as backward, or obsolete, or part of the past, in an uneven, globalized world-system. Kulchyski (2012), for example, argues that examining the egalitarian practices of hunting gathering First Nations such as the Dene in Canada allows us to see, using materialist perspectives, utopian sites and communities that challenge our late capitalist and white view of the present. Moreover, memory and utopia are powerfully connected, and understandings of the future are all too often rooted in and shaped both by the present and the past: see, for example, anti-colonial and non-violent politician M.K. Gandhi's notion of the oceanic circle of the village republic, articulated in an article in the *Harijan* of July 21, 1946 (Gandhi and Brown 2008, p. 158), an article in which he posited a normative vision of village-based democracy, one based on actually existing social structures in both the past and the present of twentieth-century India. A willingness to understand utopian futures in a non-linear way also enables us to analyze how past, present, and future intertwine to shape our sense of futures.

Utopian imagination of futures, especially in aesthetic and cultural texts, should also be seen as heuristic and spatially playful, with ironies and paradoxes in texts such as More's *Utopia* disrupting the present, and allowing the reader to speculate or play with possible, alternative futures, as Marin (1984) argued. Scholars have also suggested that utopian imagination and practice operate through the principle of desire, and indeed, the desire for a better way of life (Levitas 1990), and the principle of hope (Bloch 1986), both of which have powerful elements of anticipation and projection into the future. Bloch characterizes hope as follows:

> Hope, superior to fear, is neither passive like the latter, nor locked into nothingness. The emotion of hope goes out of itself, makes people broad instead of confining them, cannot know nearly enough of what it is that makes them inwardly aimed, of what may be allied to them outwardly. The work of this emotion requires people who throw themselves actively into what is becoming, to which they themselves belong. It will not tolerate a dog's life which feels itself only passively thrown into What Is, which is not seen through, even wretchedly recognized. (Bloch 1986, vol. 1, p. 3)

That provocative, non-complacent hope, part of the world of always-becoming that utopia represents for Bloch, is anticipatory and has

resonances with the imagination of and practices to create critical, alternative futures (CF. KEYWORD HOPE).

In histories of Western utopian thought, utopia is said to have mutated into euchronia in Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment imagination, displacing the good place of utopia into a good time in the future. Vieira (2010) links this to the Enlightenment, to the scientific revolution, and to Marxism, and sees euchronia as a trend pioneeringly found in France from the eighteenth century culminating in nineteenth-century utopian imagination, in the work and writing of utopian socialists such as Saint-Simonians, of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, who regarded themselves as scientific socialists, in a way that many such as the present writer would consider fallacious, and of British socialist, neo-medievalist, and crafts movement leader William Morris. But it is symptomatic that the term euchronia has not caught on even in wider intellectual usage, since some of the most durable and critical utopian thinking and imagination even in Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment times remained non-linear imaginations of futures, as, arguably in the hands of Morris, in his prose fiction *News from Nowhere* ([1890] 2012). Miguel Abensour (2012) argues, following the philosophical thought of Emmanuel Levinas (1999), for a view of utopia as radical alterity. Abensour finds the fictional correlate for his philosophical argument in Morris's *News from Nowhere*, in which, introducing an original utopian hypothesis, the imagined, utopian, future society would experience at the outset an epoch of rest, a suspension of historical time, or a stasis of time. This is a time of rest but also a time when there is a heightening sense of disquiet, as the sign of the coming of a new and different history.

Some of the most powerful utopian texts produced by writers from colonized countries also disrupt any notion of utopia tied to a linear notion of the future. A good example is the short story "Sultana's Dream" by Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, 1880–1932, South Asian and Bengali Muslim writer. In 1905, when Rokeya's husband read "Sultana's Dream," he had commented, "A terrible revenge!" and had persuaded his autodidact wife to send it to the *Indian Ladies' Magazine*, which published the work. "Sultana's Dream" remains widely read and appreciated and retains its status as one of the most successful pieces of Indian writing in English. In a dream, a female dreamer enters the country of Ladyland, guided by a female friend, who may be called Sister Sara. In this country ruled by a queen who decrees universal education, women, who have developed their minds and cultivated science, agree to save the country during a

ruinous war with the technologies they have developed, but on condition that men be secluded in the *mardana*, the equivalent of the *zenana* women had hitherto been kept in seclusion in. The women then continue to govern the country, now called Ladyland, creating a utopia where science, technology, and virtue work in harmony. Air travel is the only mode of transport, land is cultivated by electrically driven motors, and the weather is controlled. This imagined country is an otherwhere and otherwhen found in a dream. It is not posited as a future of contemporary Bengal but as an alternative pathway, in the subjunctive mood: at one point, the guide to Ladyland says, when the dreamer praises the garden-like quality of the utopia, "Your Calcutta could become a nicer garden than this if only your countrymen wanted to make it so." The reader makes an inferential leap, and imagines the utopian world of Ladyland as an alternate pathway that might lead to an alternate future.

Fredric Jameson's (2005) work also questions any easy, linear correlation between utopian imagination and the future. In his introduction to *Archaeologies of the Future*, Jameson argues that

> Utopian form is itself a representational meditation on radical difference, radical otherness, and on the systemic nature of the social totality, to the point where one cannot imagine any fundamental change in our social existence which has not at first thrown off Utopian visions like so many sparks from a comet. (Jameson 2005, p. xii)

Jameson posits "two distinct lines of descendancy from More's inaugural text: the one intent on the realization of the Utopian program, the other an obscure yet omnipresent Utopian impulse finding its way to the surface in a variety of covert expressions and practices" (Jameson 2005, p. 3). The utopian impulse, which Jameson values above the utopian program, lends itself well to a relationship with the future that is radically open and non-linear.

Michel Foucault's suggestive notion of heterotopia is another major node of contemporary critical thinking about utopia, even though Foucault himself distinguishes between utopia and heterotopia. According to him, utopias "present society itself in a perfected form, or else society turned upside down, but in any case these utopias are fundamentally unreal spaces" (Foucault and Miskowiec 1986, p. 24). Heterotopias are, according to Foucault, to be found in the now-here, not in an imagined future, being spaces of alterity in the everyday world. Conceptualized in

Foucault's short piece "Of Other Spaces," March 1967, heterotopias juxtapose in a single space several incompatible spatial elements, encapsulate spatio-temporal discontinuities or intensities, and presuppose an ambivalent system of opening/closing, entry/exit, distance/penetration. Foucault's examples include cemeteries, brothels, Jesuit utopian colonies, ships, gardens, Muslim baths, prisons, asylums, museums, and festivals. Heterotopias offer shifting ephemeral spaces of otherness within disciplinary structures of power, not projections into a future.

Contemporary critical utopian thinkers make much use of the notion of heterotopia, which would be, to use Deleuze's and Guattari's (1994) definition, immanent utopias. Here, then, utopia does not project into the future, but is to be found in liminal spaces in everyday life, and offers gestures toward another spatiality and an alternative temporality from our present vantage point. Deleuze and Guattari underscored the normative importance of immanent utopias, rather than transcendent ones.

> What matters is not the supposed distinction between utopian and scientific socialism but the different types of utopia, one of them being revolution. In utopia (as in philosophy) there is always the risk of a restoration, and sometimes a proud affirmation, of transcendence, so that we need to distinguish between authoritarian utopias, or utopias of transcendence, and immanent, revolutionary, libertarian utopias. (Deleuze and Guattari 1994, p. 100)

Immanent everyday utopias include those articulated by feminist writers from colonized countries such as Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, who, apart from writing utopian fiction, was also an educational activist and shaper of a school and of socially experimental communities in the city of Calcutta (Bagchi 2009). Current thinking about utopia and the future would also do well to engage with this insightful remark by Terry Eagleton: "The best kind of utopian thought [...] holds present and future in tension by pointing to those forces active in the present that might lead beyond it" (Eagleton 2016, p. 416). We might thus wish to work with a view of utopian futures grounded in a critical view of the present, in imaginative relationship to the past, and inevitably gesturing to both times and spaces of critical alterity, which might also take the form of alternative and imagined futures. Scholars at the Institute for Social Futures and at the Centre for Mobilities Research at Lancaster University, institutions led originally by the late Urry, for example, are engaged in such research, which adopts a social, critical, and non-technocratic view of futures; these institutions are

engaged in conducting interdisciplinary projects on subjects as Mobile Utopia, mobilizing utopia to understand a wide range of texts, practices, movements, and mobilities, spanning disciplines such as history, sociology, art, and literature, and spanning critical research and creative practice (see, e.g., Southern et al. 2017).

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