NO OTHER PLANET

Utopian Visions for a Climate-Changed World

MATHIAS THALER

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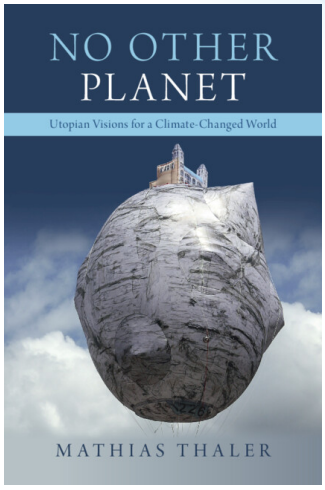

Visions of utopia – some hopeful, others fearful – have become increasingly prevalent in recent times. This groundbreaking, timely book examines expressions of the utopian imagination with a focus on the pressing challenge of how to inhabit a climate-changed world. Forms of social dreaming are tracked across two domains: political theory and speculative fiction. The analysis aims to both uncover the key utopian and dystopian tendencies in contemporary debates around the Anthropocene; as well as to develop a political theory of radical transformation that avoids not only debilitating fatalism but also wishful thinking. This book juxtaposes theoretical interventions, from Bruno Latour to the members of the Dark Mountain collective, with fantasy and science fiction texts by N. K. Jemisin, Kim Stanley Robinson and Margaret Atwood, debating viable futures for a world that will look and feel very different from the one we live in right now.

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'No Other Planet synthesises astute theoretical analysis, bold imagination and an acute consciousness of the stakes for scholars writing about the climate crisis to engage readers in the transformative possibilities of utopian thought, art and action. Dispelling both tired dismissals of utopia as wishful thinking, and their counterpart in resigned fatalism, Mathias Thaler demonstrates how different utopian imaginations, in theory, in fiction and in the prefiguration of activism, can estrange, galvanise and caution those for whom the future seemed fixed by the past and present. In this sense, while never overstating the difference that theory can make in the face of our planet in peril, Thaler has written a book that allows his readers to recognise this one, only planet as one whose future our care, attention and imagination might make a difference.'
Danielle Celermajer,
The University of Sydney

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CHAPTER 1

Solid Frames and Open Doors

> To pass freely through open doors, it is necessary to respect the fact that they have solid frames. This principle, by which the old professor had always lived, is simply a requisite of the sense of reality. But if there is a sense of reality, and no one will doubt that it has its justification for existing, then there must also be something we can call a sense of possibility.
>
> Whoever has it does not say, for instance: Here this or that has happened, will happen, must happen; but he invents: Here this or that might, could, or ought to happen. If he is told that something is the way it is, he will think: Well, it could probably just as well be otherwise. So the sense of possibility could be defined outright as the ability to conceive of everything there might be just as well, and to attach no more importance to what is than to what is not.[1]

The opening paragraphs of Robert Musil's *The Man without Qualities* speak of two contradictory senses that provide guidance to our being in the world: the sense of reality and the sense of possibility. Both depend on and influence each other, as Musil's protagonist, Ulrich, soon comes to appreciate. This is the case because one cannot expect to cultivate a sense of reality, of what is necessarily so-and-so, without simultaneously exploring a sense of possibility, of what could, due to its contingency, always be otherwise.[2]

[1] Musil, *The Man without Qualities*, para. 8.3–8.4. Throughout this book, I cite from e-books (in epub-format) by referring to the paragraph from which quotes are taken. To determine the paragraph, I use the cross-platform, open-source application Calibre (https://calibre-ebook.com).

[2] See: Sattler, "Contingency and Necessity." This attention to both the sense of reality and the sense of possibility also influences Musil's strategy of narration. On this aspect, see: Weissberg, "Versuch einer Sprache des Möglichen."

In this book, I pay heed to both the solid frames that structure our existence and to the open doors that enable us to change our lives. More concretely, I follow up on Musil's lead by looking at various and sometimes competing expressions of the utopian imagination.

This certainly seems to be an opportune moment to direct attention to utopias. Today, utopias are everywhere: from popular TV series telling post-apocalyptic stories, to revolutionary plans for the built environment; from philosophical treatises on the technological enhancement of *Homo sapiens*, to intimate settings created by counter-hegemonic communities. Our collective appetite to conjure and inhabit other worlds appears to be insatiable.

How can we explain this, given that only a few decades ago utopias were either derided as lofty castles in the sky or denounced as dangerous schemes for social engineering? And what should we make of the growing number of rival utopias that circulate in the public sphere? Are they merely the by-product of a craving for escapist fantasies in an era when alternatives to the status quo are increasingly elusive, or do they genuinely articulate empowering visions of the future?

Answers to these questions are not easy to discover. Important findings in the humanities and social sciences notwithstanding, we do not yet possess a satisfactory account of utopian visions in and for our times. This book aims to fill this lacuna, by analyzing what is the biggest challenge the world presently faces: anthropogenic climate change, a challenge for which, due to its multi-causality and scope, no straightforward solutions present themselves. The ongoing ecological crisis, which imperils our survival as a species, accelerates the extinction of the Earth's biota and significantly affects the planetary ecosphere, makes it imperative to critically reflect on how we could salvage our sense of reality while at the same time extending our sense of possibility.

It is one of the book's underlying assumptions that we do not have much chance of survival unless we take the task of figuring out better ways of being and living very seriously indeed. Utopias, conveyed through social and political theory and speculative fiction, can help in this process. Properly conceived, they are as much concerned with disclosing radically new perspectives as they are about illuminating the material and ideological circumstances that shape our lives. Precisely because the

future is uncertain and risky, we cannot but conjure alternative scenarios – some hopeful, others fearful – of what is yet to come.[3] Since there is, in spite of delusions of interstellar escape, no other planet for our species to dwell on, we have no choice but to imaginatively explore better ways of being and living here on Earth.[4]

Against this backdrop, we may ask ourselves what modes of imagining a climate-changed world are prevalent today. And why should we turn to theory building and storytelling in particular when so much is practically at stake? These queries are central to reckoning with the current predicament, for coming to terms with the effects of climate change is not only a matter of acquiring the correct kind of scientific knowledge and of taking appropriate mitigating and adaptive action; it is also a matter of debating viable futures for a world that will look and feel very different from the one we are living in right now, as the COVID-19 pandemic has already been teaching us.[5]

Since "utopia" and "utopianism" can mean so many things, it will be helpful to start with an exploratory definition. With Miguel Abensour, I understand utopianism broadly as the *education of a desire for being and living otherwise*. This utopian pedagogy can take multiple forms, depending on the historical context wherein the underlying desire arises, but there are three key mechanisms on which it relies: estranging, galvanizing and cautioning. As will become evident on the following pages, it is through estranging, galvanizing and cautioning that social dreaming proceeds.

This definition is perhaps not commonly accepted in the public, but it equips us with the best framework for capturing a great variety of proposals to envisage a climate-changed world. Utopianism, thus

[3] On the centrality of imaginaries for debates around climate change, see: Milkoreit, "Imaginary Politics."

[4] The emancipatory potential of such acts of picturing alternatives has been acknowledged by many advocates of Critical Theory, but it is Iris Marion Young who put it most succinctly: "Imagination is the faculty of transforming the experience of what is into a projection of what could be, the faculty that frees thought to form ideals and norms" (*Justice and the Politics of Difference*, 6).

[5] For a discussion of the intersections between the COVID-19 pandemic and climate change, see: Malm, *Corona, Climate, Chronic Emergency*.

understood, is not exclusively directed at the idealizing construction of wholly other worlds. Rather, it consists in a specific form of creative and transformative reflection that breaks the spell of the status quo, a demonstration – in thought and in practice – that things could be otherwise: better (*eu*-topia) or worse (*dys*-topia), but different nonetheless.

Throughout this book, I follow Lucy Sargisson in holding "utopianism" apart from "utopia": utopianism describes a wide phenomenon that can be reconstructed in different cultural contexts and historical eras, and whose essence will be fleshed out shortly in terms of a desire for being and living otherwise, or in terms of social dreaming. Utopias, by contrast, are concrete manifestations of said phenomenon – they instantiate what utopianism aspires to be.[6] Hence, while my overall goal is to improve our understanding of *utopianism* in and for our times, the way to achieve this is via an in-depth engagement with manifold and sometimes conflicting *utopias*, formulated across a range of media and genres.

By way of creative and transformative reflection, utopias perform various functions, from offering relief to those who have to endure oppressive and violent conditions to the propagation of revolutionary agendas that aim to overthrow the hegemonic order of things. These tasks can be initially approached through the juxtaposition of two extremes: daydreaming (for the sake of coping with an unbearable situation) and worldbuilding (for the sake of creating a different order). Both represent forms of utopianism, but they play very different roles for the individual or collective undertaking them.

In the first case, utopia is there to console us in a situation that appears overbearing and beyond our control. In the second case, utopia is supposed to aid us in modifying the fundamental circumstances of our existence. While daydreaming can have important, if somewhat inchoate, repercussions – just think how the unofficial slogan of the *soixante-huitards* "Be realistic – demand the impossible!" keeps on invigorating counter-hegemonic struggles – it is worldbuilding that usually gets associated with the transformative potential of utopianism.[7]

[6] Sargisson, *Fool's Gold?*, 8.

[7] On the delayed yet real impact of the revolutions of the 1960s see: Graeber, *The Democracy Project*, chap. 5: Breaking the Spell. On the revolutionary appeal of the 1968 generation,

In her recent work, Donna Haraway has uncovered the biggest impediment that any vindication of utopianism in and for our times faces: that of avoiding both the "position that the game is over, it's too late, there's no sense trying to make anything any better" and, on the other side, "the comic faith in technofixes."[8] The still unexplored space between these two positions is where the most fruitful conversations around the future of our species, the Earth's biota and the planetary ecosphere are to be had. Only if we manage to liberate ourselves simultaneously from the incapacitating grip of ecological grief and from the delusional obsession with what I will later call "solutionism," can we grapple in earnest with the present moment.

Not everyone welcomes the resurgence of utopian thinking and acting, though. In fact, aversion to utopianism possesses an impressive pedigree in the history of political ideas. Traditionally, two objections have been levelled against it. The first accuses utopias of being useless, because the proverbial "castles in the sky" do not furnish us with protective shelter in the here and now. In this case, the charge entails that utopianism-as-daydreaming propagates nothing but wishful thinking. It ultimately collapses into escapism, dressed up in the shiny garb of sophisticated theory or high literature.

According to the second objection, utopias are not merely impractical but dangerous, for they frequently become, perhaps even against the best intentions of their creators, vehicles for domination. Here, the future fabricated by utopianism-as-worldbuilding is condemned as a manipulative smokescreen, rendering invisible the many sacrifices that would have to be made to reach the preferred ideal state.

Both of these criticisms will receive attention in Chapter 2, but note that they take off from diametrically opposed premises. In the first case, utopianism's problematic side is blamed on its presumed failure to come to terms with what Musil calls the "solid frame" of our shared reality. Daydreaming can become harmful when it distracts us from what should

and its continuing relevance for political theory, see: Rossi, "Being Realistic and Demanding the Impossible."

[8] Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, 3.

matter most – remedying the dire situation we currently find ourselves in.

In the second case, the concern is, by contrast, that utopianism can have profoundly negative consequences, precisely because people might actually want to create the alternative world that a specific utopian vision conjures. The perniciousness of worldbuilding, on this account, stems from its propensity to seduce an audience into believing in utopia's realizability. In this view, Musil's "open door" is nothing but a trap.

The ambition behind this book is to respond to these criticisms and to rehabilitate utopia's potential for our times. Put simply, my rejoinder to the challenges of utopianism-as-daydreaming and utopianism-as-worldbuilding is not so much that they completely miss the point – there is an important truth to these worries that should not be ignored – but rather, that they overemphasize the risks and dangers of utopianism while discounting its tremendous benefits. The crux of my argument is therefore that we urgently require utopias to identify ways out of our current predicament, the ongoing ecological crisis; yet, at the same time, we also need to comprehend which utopias will be useful for engaging the imagination in productive ways, and which utopias might lead us astray.[9]

Accordingly, the project I pursue here delivers a systematic account of those utopias that assist us in dealing with real-world problems. These problems, I contend, are the result of an extraordinary dearth of genuine alternatives to the status quo. In addressing this lack, the book hopes to accomplish two objectives: to reconstruct the main eutopian and dystopian tendencies in contemporary discussions about climate change; and to provide orientation for our planetary future on the basis of which a political theory of radical transformation – avoiding both fatalism and wishful thinking – can emerge.

The remainder of this introduction lays the foundation for the more detailed analyses in the rest of the book by doing several things: first, I will elaborate on the wide-ranging concept of utopianism that undergirds my approach. In a second step, my goal is to say something more specific about the context in which I discuss contemporary

[9] Benjamin Kunkel thus seems right to suggest that today's existential choice is really between "utopia or bust." See: Kunkel, *Utopia or Bust*.

utopianism – ways of seeing a climate-changed world that are often associated with the Anthropocene. Third, I discuss the disciplinary perspectives that inform this scholarly project. The following section explains the book's methodological approach, by introducing two key terms for my case selection: constellation and plot line. In the fifth and final section, I provide a synopsis of the ensuing chapters.

1.1 A PRIMER FOR STUDYING UTOPIAS

In order to chart the space between defeatism and self-aggrandizement, we require a capacious framework that covers a great variety of utopias. Even though Chapter 2 will be devoted to examining this framework in more detail, this section includes a primer for how I propose to study utopias in the Anthropocene.

When approaching utopianism, we need to attend to at least three interrelated issues; first, the *dimensions* of utopianism: utopianism contains both *eu*-topian and *dys*-topian elements.[10] This view contravenes everyday linguistic conventions whereby the word "utopian" is usually reserved for positive visions that are meant to be significantly better than the status quo. However, the advantage of zeroing in on both eutopian and dystopian theories and narratives is that this allows us to better grasp the varying roles that hope and fear play in utopias: they can mobilize people to fundamentally change their behaviour by widening their horizon of expectation; or they can constrain their freedom, by imprisoning them in fatalistic stories.

Second, the *sites* of utopianism: utopianism manifests in three domains, which shape one another – political and social theory; fictional narratives in various genres and media (novels, films, paintings and even music); and social movements and experiments in communal living.[11] It is a central claim of this book that a holistic account of utopianism cannot materialize unless we scrutinize the intersections between these

[10] Although I employ a different terminology, this perspective resonates with Gregory Claeys' idea of a "composite definition" of utopianism. See: Claeys, "News from Somewhere."

[11] For the *locus classicus* of this taxonomy, see: Sargent, "The Three Faces of Utopianism Revisited."

three sites. We need to examine them in parallel and investigate where there are overlaps and divergences. The structure of this book reflects this insight by concentrating in particular on the storytelling and theory-building poles of utopianism.

Third, the *varieties* of utopianism: the utopian tradition is split between two rival strands – one that foregrounds the top–down construction of other worlds and one that conceives of utopian visions as more localized, modest, piecemeal interrogations of the hegemonic mainstream in society. Objections to utopianism often entail a critique of its tendency to generate static blueprints of the future. Human beings, the worry goes, are simply incapable of making systematic plans for transforming society as such. If they still try to do so, their wishes will inexorably pave the way for totalitarian domination, these critics deplore. Yet, once we envisage utopianism as internally varied and structurally ambiguous, the charge of utopianism's violent perfectionism becomes much less trenchant.

Based on this tripartite framework, I will argue that utopianism amounts to a flexible method, rather than the formulation of a fixed end goal, that can be applied to the anticipatory modelling of an uncertain and risky future. Where do the origins of this framework lie, given that up until recently utopianism seemed to be entirely discredited? The complex notion of utopianism springs from a rich discussion that emerged at a particular historical juncture. In the aftermath of the fall of communism, utopianism seemed to have been deposited on the ash heap of history. The triumphant victory of liberal democracy ostensibly signalled the end of history, to cite Francis Fukuyama's diagnosis.[12] In the New World Order, there would be no further appetite for utopias. The capitalist West appeared to have miraculously succeeded at what the most ambitious designs for a better future had only dreamed about: bringing into existence a global order where individuals could prosper in full liberty, without fear of oppression by the state.[13]

[12] *The End of History and the Last Man.*

[13] To be sure, I do not claim here that nobody pursued utopian ideas in the immediate aftermath of the Cold War. All I am suggesting is that the public mood after the demise of "actually existing socialism" was a decidedly anti-utopian one, due to the triumphalist

"Cold War liberals" – from Karl Popper to Isaiah Berlin, Judith Shklar and Leszek Kołakowski – had long warned that images of a better future would exert a detrimental impact on human freedom and societal pluralism. To hope too much, for instance by putting eschatological faith in a classless, egalitarian society, was condemned as the harbinger of extremism. The picturing of another world, just on the horizon and cleansed of all impurities, was so problematic, these commentators maintained, because it erased the inherently defective nature of human beings, perenially torn between impulses to do good and temptations to do bad. In promoting social and political arrangements that were ill fit for what Immanuel Kant described as "the crooked wood"[14] of humanity, utopian thinkers thus prepared the ground for widespread, eliminatory violence, unleashed by those who took it upon themselves to turn the perfect blueprint into harsh reality. A mature polity would be one, the Cold War liberals insisted, in which utopian impulses were either suppressed, circumscribed or transmuted into depoliticized aesthetics.

Over the past two decades, however, utopian thinking and acting has been resurrected from its temporary deathbed. This resurfacing can be observed in various social and cultural arenas. From global insurgencies against autocratic regimes to science fiction narratives, from radical pleas to transform the built environment to exhilarating experiments in communal living – today's public debate seems saturated with utopian ideas and practices. Just think of increasing enthusiasm around the World Social Forum, whose celebratory motto *Another World Is Possible* is unabashedly utopian.[15] This slogan points to the centrality of prefigurative forms of action and organization within the movement and beyond.[16] Put otherwise, since the goal of the alter-globalization camp is to demonstrate in practice that alternatives to the unjust status quo

rhetoric employed by defenders of Western liberalism and capitalism. For an overview of recent writings on anti-utopianism see: Skrimshire, "What Is Anti-Utopianism?"

[14] "Idea for a Universal History from a Cosmopolitan Perspective," 9.

[15] Santos, *The Rise of the Global Left*.

[16] Maeckelbergh, "Doing Is Believing"; Raekstad and Gradin, *Prefigurative Politics*; Sande, "Fighting with Tools."

already exist, the means to attain that goal need to abide by the underlying principles of a more equitable, dignified and non-violent society.[17]

Moreover, changes in local and workplace democracy have infused campaigns for wider civic participation with fresh energy.[18] Revolutionary occupations, too – from Tahrir Square to Occupy Wall Street – have been described as concerted attempts to carve out inspirational spaces for mounting resistance against the hegemonic mainstream of late capitalism. It is from within these utopian settings that protesters and activists have been trying to alter society at large.[19]

Once we move from the social sphere to the realm of culture, we quickly realize that utopias have undergone an astonishing renaissance in recent times. From the huge success of dystopian narratives in popular TV shows and adaptations (*Westworld*, *Handmaid's Tale*, *Black Mirror*, to name but a few) to the constant growth of climate change fiction, "other worlds" have become major sites of artistic expression.[20]

It is important to acknowledge that this resurgence of utopianism represents more than just a short-lived trend. As I will show, there are specific reasons why social dreaming has become so prevalent at this precise moment in time, to do with the circumstances of our precarious existence on planet Earth, at the beginning of the twenty-first century. It is, I argue, because we feel deeply disoriented, perhaps even paralyzed and terrified, when we contemplate an intrinsically uncertain and risky future, that we are drawn to utopian visions of what is to come.

Here is another reason for today's revival of utopianism: even though they frequently depict societies in the far future, utopias are always concerned with the present moment. The "not yet" and the "no place" alluded to in utopian projects necessarily hold up a mirror to the status quo.[21] Whether the future is imagined as foreordained, or whether it can

[17] Prefiguration is, at its core, a utopian practice. See: Kinna, "Utopianism and Prefiguration."

[18] Fung and Wright, *Deepening Democracy*; Wright, *Envisioning Real Utopias*.

[19] Butler, *Notes toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*; Graeber, *The Democracy Project*.

[20] On the recent turn to dystopianism in particular, see: Trotta, Platen and Sadri, *Broken Mirrors*.

[21] It was Ursula K. Le Guin who put this point best: "The thing about science fiction is, it isn't really about the future. It's about the present. But the future gives us great freedom