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UTOPIAN IMAGINATION

Power to Change the Present

THEMATIC SECTION

Introduction to thematic section

The Potential of Utopian Imagination

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> "Utopians do not believe frustration, poverty, and privation to be necessary for creativity."
>
> Lyman Tower Sargent

The concluding words to Lyman Tower Sargent's revised essay on the "three faces" of utopianism published in 1994 are worth recalling in this grimly dystopian moment of world history. The agents of state terror who believe the opposite are in the ascendancy. Their tanks, bulldozers, and snipers, masked kidnappers and lying politicians abuse their power to deprive others of dignity, freedom, and life. But every baker who continues baking; every child who laughs; every grandmother who resists; every nurse and doctor who insists on caring; every journalist who documents their crimes for human memory proves that the human spirit of quotidian endeavour, creativity, and joy is stronger. As human greed and ignorance threaten the very tapestry of life on our planet, can we still inspire hope in the utopian imagination? How are we to know what it is and how to use it responsibly? The articles in this thematic section of *VIA PANORAMICA* on the utopian imagination cannot give any kind of definitive answer to these questions; but they aspire to engage readers in serious reflection on the nature of utopian imagination and its power in helping to address the grave political and social challenges of our time.

There are many definitions of utopianism. Sargent defines it as "social dreaming", understanding it as a phenomenon that is "among the basic strata of the human experience"

(1994). By this he means that it "expresses deep-seated needs, desires, and hopes". Sargent highlights utopianism's origin in the sincere and creative expression of the human individual. Ruth Levitas emphasizes the wish to change the social sphere. For Levitas, utopia is "the expression of desire for a better way of living and of being", one that can be developed as a method for the "reconstitution of society in imagination and in reality" (2013, xi–xii).

For Tom Moylan, the utopian imagination has revolutionary potential. This insight, he argues, was "revived and deepened" in the twentieth century by Ernst Bloch (2014, 20). Moylan discusses the notion of the "utopian impulse", which is a dissatisfaction with the present social reality, an unconscious yearning for something better. He explains that Bloch enables us to perceive the utopian impulse as the driver of desire for freedom from oppression through a "radical rupture" with the status quo. The negative aspect of utopian imagination is critical for Moylan. The utopian impulse is provoked by a consciousness of "the radical insufficiency of the present", which can kindle an imaginative critique of the present social order (Moylan 2014, 15–27). Hence, while Sargent affirms that suffering is not necessary for creativity, Moylan perceives the importance of placing hope for social change in the power of the utopian impulse to inspire creative resistance in the confrontation with oppression.

The expression of utopianism is multifaceted. For Sargent, it has three "faces": literary utopias, utopian social theory, and intentional communities; that is, communities set up and run according to an interpretation of utopian principles. Sociological utopianism ranges from the revolutionary socialist theories of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels to twentieth-century theorists such as Ernst Bloch, Herbert Marcuse, and Karl Mannheim. Literary expressions of utopianism have produced a vast corpus, one that is generally held to encompass dystopian fiction, utopia's "generic sibling" (Moylan). In simple terms, where utopias envision a better society for contrast with the author's and reader's present, dystopias envision a worse one. However, dystopias encompass a wide spectrum of visions, from utopianism to anti-utopianism. As Moylan explains, their meaning lies somewhere between a progressive affirmation of the utopian impulse to reject oppression, and a conservative, anti-utopian dismissal of the possibility of any alternative (Moylan 2000, xiii). The three articles of this thematic section explore the potential of utopian imagination

from three perspectives and approaches that broadly correspond to Sargent's three faces of utopianism.

In "Be Here Now: Immanent Utopias and Permanent Revolution", Matt York draws on the experience of intentional communities. He includes insights from his work with the "Deep Commons" project, in which activists and scholars from across the world come together to imagine and enact forms of utopian solidarity.

York critiques "the nature of our current political utopias" and the gap between current social challenges and imagined futures that might overcome them. His provocative argument is that a "predominantly 'transcendent' form of contemporary political utopianism", which he defines as "situated in an ever-receding future or past, or otherwise in an alternate reality altogether", is ill-suited to the purpose of critically addressing the polycrises of our times. Using anarchist theory, York argues that utopian imaginaries need to be "grounded" in the here-and-now, that is, based in social practices that "cultivate ecologies of solidarity and care" and avoid the destructive consequences of "capitalism, anthroparchy, patriarchy, racism, and the State".

York's approach reflects a significant thread in utopian thought—one that includes Bloch, and Marx and Engels—which is sceptical of the value of the literary expression of utopianism. For York, utopian efforts of transformation need to adopt the same social measures and practices that are envisaged to bring about an improvement in social relations and outcomes. He raises the question whether it is possible for literature to serve as a utopian practice in the present.

For this reader, the greatest joy in York's analysis is his engagement with individual people's experience of the Deep Commons. These voices affirm his hope in the possibility of positive social change through co-imagined, intentional utopian communities. The communities he describes are far from perfect. Forms of misogyny, racism, inequality and exploitation persist; but hope is found in community members' ongoing commitment to work consciously, in solidarity for a better horizon. For York, then, the utopian imagination must be used to seek and live "grounded" alternatives to everyday problems rather than to envision fictional alternatives to the present society in another place or time.

Tânia Cerqueira focuses on the literary face of utopianism in her article "'*Amor Deliria Nervosa*': The Erasure of Love in Young Adult Dystopian Fiction". Cerqueira

considers the utopian potential in young adult (YA) dystopias' representation of the challenge that adolescents' sexual awakening poses to prevailing laws and social customs. Sexual awakening is a topos of YA fiction, typically represented as a dynamic of liberation and discovery, written for readers experiencing their own urge to challenge the norms and boundaries expected of them as they grow into adult society. In many dystopian fictions, the repression of love and sexual freedom by authoritarian regimes is a common theme, along with the instrumentalization of reproduction to serve ideological control of the population. In her exploration of YA dystopias, including Lauren Oliver's *Delirium* series, Cerqueira explores how the energy of repressed love and sexuality in projections of authoritarian societies is represented as posing a challenge to power.

Cerqueira's subtle exploration of the texts demonstrates how the utopian imagination animates the YA dystopian fictions that she explores through the centrality of desire, in particular, love and sexual desire. Hence, these works can be seen as being animated by the utopian imagination, in the sense of evoking "the expression of desire for a better way of living and of being" (Levitas). As Cerqueira argues, the role of emotions in the narratives, in particular, of love, is "framed as a catalyst for critical awareness and potential resistance". She concludes that, in these works, "love is not merely a personal experience but a foundational element of collective resistance and societal transformation, playing a critical role in the pursuit of social dreaming". These YA fictions then can be regarded as projections of dystopian societies, which through the representation of scenarios of both repressed love and love as utopian impulse, animate the utopian imagination to inspire resistance against the status quo.

Like Cerqueira, Catarina Almeida discusses dystopian fiction in her article, "Weaponizing Women's Bodies for Authoritarian Power: The Handmaid's Tale and Anti-Abortion Politics in the USA". However, Almeida's approach is sociological, using Margaret Atwood's well-known work as a cognitive map for an analysis of "the current crisis in women's reproductive rights in the USA". Almeida's discussion shifts between the fictional dystopia and the current dystopic reality of Trump's authoritarian rule. In this way she highlights the complex implications of the Supreme Court's decision in June 2022 to overturn the Roe v. Wade ruling, which has protected the right to abortion in the USA since 1973.

Atwood's dystopia was published 40 years ago, and represents a more extreme authoritarian society even than the harsh restrictions on women's reproductive autonomy now imposed in a majority of states of the union. However, Almeida succeeds in demonstrating how the dystopia can shed light on a number of mechanisms of political control and media propagandizing that prevail in Trump's USA. Almeida highlights the shared motivations of political power and of the religious movements that support them in both the dystopia and contemporary US society. It is in the area of the impact on women's autonomy that Almeida's analysis is most revealing. She sheds light on how surveillance is used not only for overt control, but also covertly, to manipulate women's compliance and complicity in their own oppression. She unpicks the mechanisms of dystopian power that impose grave physical and emotional consequences on women.

For Almeida then, the power of the utopian imagination lies in Moylan's notion of dystopias as "challenging cognitive maps" that help readers understand the present world (Moylan 2000, 11). Her article also highlights the power of authoritarian regimes to manipulate a population's social imaginary, using media and the mythic power of religious narrative to oppress and control.

CONCLUSIONS

Fernando *et al* (2016) offer some social scientific evidence for the real-world value of exercising the utopian imagination. They conducted a questionnaire study of 341 residents of the USA and the UK to investigate the psychological function of utopian thinking. The UK residents were interviewed shortly after the Brexit referendum; the US residents both before and after the first election of Trump as president in 2016. The authors found that "utopian thinking resulted in motivation to engage with society in line with Levitas's (1990) functions of utopia" and had "an overall negative effect on [satisfication with society] and system justification". They concluded that "engaging with … utopia, tends to elicit [a] broader social change motivation". This finding that utopian thinking has a negative valence associated with social dissatisfaction and critique of the status quo offers support for Moylan's argument that the utopian impulse expresses desire for rupture with the

present social order. Among their conclusions, the authors observe that research on utopian thinking in social psychology is new, as the field has favoured the study of social conservativism over investigating people's interest in social change. Perhaps the conservative, anti-utopian assumption that people dislike change is overstated; conveniently, for those in power.

In the conclusion to his 1994 essay, Sargent highlights the importance of both utopian expression and a clear understanding of it, warning that "[f]ailure to heed the urgings of [utopian social dreaming] produces both personal and social pathology, grotesques of the imagination and of politics". I commend the three articles in this thematic section to the reader, and hope that they will help improve understanding of the nature of utopianism and kindle utopian desire to continue the struggle to change a grim political world.

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