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Where there is no vision, the people perish: a utopian ethic for a transformed future

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Introduction

This paper argues that thinking about our ethical responsibilities in the present and for the future is helped by looking through the lens of Utopia. I have addressed the plethora of uses of the term Utopia elsewhere, in *The Concept of Utopia*, and more recently the merits of Utopia as a sociological method in Utopia as Method: *The Imaginary Reconstitution of Society*; this paper draws substantially on these books.[1] The imagination of a potential, different society in the future draws attention to the need for change, offers a direction towards that change, and a stimulus to action in the present.

Political philosophy, moral philosophy and ethics tend to look on sustainable prosperity, like justice or equality, as an abstract good. Utopia may also do this, but its emphasis differs in two ways. First, it operates at the more concrete level of the social institutions encapsulating those principles, or from which they emerge. Secondly, it considers those institutions as a system — a social system, embedded in an ecological system. There is another difference, I think. By definition, all discussion of a better future is normative, that is, it makes evaluative claims about what is good. But much discussion about ethics (in common with almost all of the Western intellectual tradition) separates thought and feeling. Writers such as Martha Nussbaum (a philosopher) and Andrew Sayer (a sociologist) have argued

> *The Utopian approach allows us not only to imagine what an alternative society could look like, but enables us to imagine what it might feel like to inhabit it.*

[1] ↩ Levitas, R. (2010) *The Concept of Utopia* Oxford: Peter Lang [1990]; Levitas, R. (2013) *Utopia as Method: The Imaginary Reconstitution of Society,* London: Palgrave Macmillan.

strongly that this distinction is deeply problematic, neglecting our embodied human nature and our necessary existence in a web of human social relationships.[2] The Utopian approach allows us not only to imagine what an alternative society could look like, but enables us to imagine what it might feel like to inhabit it, thus giving a greater potential depth to our judgements about the good. Sociology is essentially concerned with the operation of society as a system, including both its institutional arrangements and the emergent moralities and structures of feelings that characterise it, so the utopian approach is primarily sociological rather than abstractly philosophical.

Prosperity should be understood not as prosperousness in the economic sense of economically wealthy, but in the wider and deeper sense of prospering or thriving.

Sustainable prosperity is one way of thinking about a potentially better society on a global scale. This is different from sustainable growth, which so easily slides into a conventional commitment to economic growth as we know it, translated as (economic) growth that can be sustained. Prosperity should be understood not as prosperousness in the economic sense of economically wealthy, but in the wider and deeper sense of prospering or thriving.[3]

adical change has never been more necessary. Ecological pressures suggest that human survival may require more than gradual, ameliorative adjustments to our present way of life.

So the questions become what kind of a society can enable us to prosper and thrive in a way that is genuinely sustainable both ecologically and socially; how do we collectively think about the problems this presents; and how might we move in the direction of appropriate change. And, indeed, what will happen if we fail.

Dystopian Fears

Radical change has never been more necessary. Ecological pressures suggest that human survival may require more than gradual, ameliorative adjustments to our present way of life. In March 2017, the World Meteorological Organization revealed that 2016 was the hottest year on record, that Arctic ice and sea ice were at record low levels, and consequently that sea levels are rising at an increasing rate.[4] Some of what may lie in store for us if we do not change our ways is suggested by Kim Stanley Robinson's *New York 2140*, published in the same month.[5] Robinson's novel is a dystopia rather than a utopia. Dystopias share with utopias the method of depicting an alternative society, but constitute a warning of what may happen if we go on as we are, rather than a projection of a desired future.

In *New York 2140*, gradually rising sea levels give way to two major pulses of flooding some decades apart as the natural barriers containing arctic ice give way. The first raises the water level to twelve feet above its current level and the second to fifty feet above. This is still New York, and the detailed descriptions of its flooded topography reflect a love of place not confined to its long-term inhabitants, for New York remains a city of and magnet for immigrants. And New York is simply one place among many, in that the global catastrophe has fundamentally altered coastlines and inundated cities worldwide. This is a novel of adaptation: people live in the upper floors of towers that remain; there are new-builds of new materials, notably graphene, light and flexible. Travel is by boat, or on foot over sky bridges that link the upper floors of the towers. Gradually, too, old buildings lose their footings and 'melt' into the water. Food is not plentiful. Some

[2] ↩ Nussbaum, M. (2003) *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Sayer, A. (2011) *Why Things Matter to People: Social Science, Values and Ethical Life.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

[3] ↩ Jackson, T. (2009/2017) *Prosperity without Growth—Foundations for the Economy of Tomorrow.* London/New York: Routledge. Jackson speaks of prosperity in terms of 'bounded' capabilities to flourish—within the limits of a finite planet.

[4] ↩ www.theguardian.com/environment/2017/mar/21/record-breaking-climate-change-world-uncharted-territory

[5] ↩ Robinson, K. S. (2017) *New York 2140,* Orbit.

things survive the cataclysms. New York still has a mayor and the New York Police Department. There are still global financial markets and internet trading, attempts at hostile takeovers of cooperative enterprises, mortgages and rents, hedge funds, labyrinthine concealment of interests, and towers full of empty flats that exist largely as parks for international capital. And the people in senior positions, as likely as not to be female and/or people of colour, are a mix we might recognise—from crooks on the make to computer nerds to some with a genuine commitment to the public good.

As with many dystopian fictions, there is the intimation of a move beyond—not in terms of turning back the flood waters, but in terms of eventually challenging the process by which the rich become richer and the poor are further dispossessed.[6] A violent storm surge destroys more half-submerged properties and destroys or strips all the trees in Central Park, which becomes a vast refuge for displaced persons. An attempt to open up the empty towers is repelled by armed private security guards, firing on the crowds and the NYPD. The financial system is brought down not by violence on the streets (or canals and rivers) but by an orchestrated withholding of rents and debt repayments. In this financial crash, rather than the banks being bailed out and the screws of austerity tightened, they are nationalised—politically possible because this, like disaster and dispossession, is happening on a global scale. Asset taxes as well as income taxes are imposed, along with currency controls and environmental protection. The neoliberal global order is overturned to be replaced by universal health care, free public education, a living wage, and full employment, and readers are invited to add their own demands.

New York 2140 is, of course, a fiction, and not the first dystopian fiction about a drowned world. But it draws attention to the two major reasons that we cannot go on as we are. First, the ecological imperative, as climate change, global warming and rising sea levels are accompanied by increasing pollution of earth, air and seas, and unstable weather patterns, presaging forced migrations exacerbated by food and resource shortages and armed conflicts. Cutting carbon emissions now may already be too late, akin to shutting the stable door after the horses have bolted—the horses, in this case, being the four horses of the apocalypse, war, famine, pestilence and death. Second, there is a conflict between ecological limits and the fundamentally expansionary character of capitalism. Flexible as capitalism is (which is part of Robinson's point), it depends, as David Harvey has shown, on compound growth of 3 per cent a year;[7] or, as Robinson puts it, 'bubbles and Ponzi schemes and capitalism all have to keep growing or else they are in deep shit'.[8] And, as David Attenborough has said, anyone who thinks that you can have infinite growth in a finite environment is either mad or an economist.[9]

Our current social and economic system is not only ecologically unsustainable, but socially unjust and inequitable, and probably socially unsustainable as well. As Thomas Piketty has shown, capitalism has an inbuilt tendency to ever-greater levels of inequality.[10] (Robinson dubs the progressive tax on incomes and capital assets imposed in New York in 2143 a Piketty Tax). The bail-out of the banks in 2009 was the largest hand-out to the owning class since 1834, when slave owners were 'compensated' for the loss of their 'property'.[11] The financial crisis was then used to force through neoliberal reforms under the banner of 'austerity', in Britain not only cutting the incomes of the poorest but radically

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6 ↩ See Moylan, T. (2000) *Scraps of the Untainted Sky*, 0xford: Westview Press.

7 ↩ Harvey, D. (2010) *The Enigma of Capital and the Crises of Capitalism,* London: Profile Books.

8 ↩ Robinson, New York 2140, p. 497.

9 ↩ Quoted in: www.theguardian.com/environment/2013/oct/16/attenborough-poorer-countries-concerned-environment. [The phrase is in its original form attributed to Kenneth Boulding, and quoted in: United States. Congress. House (1973) Energy reorganisation act of 1973: Hearings, Ninety-third Congress, first session, on H.R. 11510. p. 248.]

10 ↩ Piketty, T. (2014) *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press

11 ↩ www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jul/12/british-history-slavery-buried-scale-revealed

reducing the resources available to the central and local state and decimating public services. An estimated 80 percent of these cuts were borne by women rather than men.

This is merely the latest manifestation of the increasing concentration of resources in the hands of the global 1 per cent over the last forty years, as the share going to capital has steadily risen and the share going to wages has fallen correspondingly. In Britain, the share of national income taken by the top 10 per cent rose from 20 per cent to about 30 percent between 1977 and 1990, and has remained at that level. The share taken by the top 1 per cent has continued to rise, from 5.7 per cent in 1990 to 8.3 per cent in 2013-14. Wealth is even more concentrated: the top 1 per cent doubled their collective holdings between 2005 and 2015. There has been a veritable tsunami of books on this increasing inequality and its consequences, including its adverse consequences for economic growth. Perhaps the most influential has been Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett's *The Spirit Level*, which shows that even the rich die younger in very unequal societies.[12]

The Idea of Utopia

So, ecology and equity point to the need for radical change, a complete change in our social systems, means of livelihood and ways of life. Where there is no vision, the people perish. Enter Utopia. And then, immediately, clarification is necessary about what Utopia means, and—equally importantly—what it does not mean. The word utopia was invented by Thomas More in 1516 as a pun on *eutopia* (good place) and *outopia* (no place), and was the title of a short book written in Latin, part of which describes an ideal society. The term has, however, come to have a derogatory meaning in English. The good place that does not actually exist has come to mean the good place that cannot exist—hence in everyday use, 'utopian' at best implies unrealistic idealism. A more sinister meaning also attaches to the word: the claim that as a top-down plan, the pursuit or implementation of Utopia necessarily leads to violence, oppression, and totalitarianism. This anti-utopian position was, oddly, scarcely dented in the myriad events across Europe in 2016 in celebration of the five hundredth anniversary of More's book. The politics of this kind of anti-utopianism are essentially conservative: they run counter to radical change, and even where they purport to allow gradual change, this is essentially tied to the present.[13]

There are at least three other ways of thinking about Utopia, all of which are more useful in terms of considering our relationship with potential futures. The first is to understand Utopia or utopianism very broadly, as the expression of the desire for a better way of living or of being. Clearly, such expressions may take a variety of forms. They may often be fragmentary rather than holistic, and be expressed in art, literature, politics or religion. They vary across history and between cultures. Nevertheless, the desire and hope that things might be otherwise, and might be better, is the defining characteristic of utopian thought.[14] More's Utopia offers something more specific than this. It is a description of an alternative society—a different set of social institutions and practices embedding different ethics and values, including using gold for chamber pots and the chains of slaves. This is the second way of thinking about the idea of Utopia itself, as what Ernst Bloch described as 'social utopias'.[15] Such utopias include much of what is conventionally understood as utopian literature from More, through the great fin de siècle writers Edward Bellamy, William Morris, Charlotte Perkins Gilman and H. G. Wells, to such more contemporary authors as Marge Piercy, Ursula Le Guin or Kim Stanley

[12] ↩ Wilkinson, R. and Pickett, K. (2009), *The Spirit Level,* London: Bloomsbury.

[13] ↩ For a recent example setting of the anti-utopian position, see Gray, J. (2007) Black Mass: *Apocalyptic Religion and the Death of Utopia*. London: Allen Lane. For critiques of anti-utopianism see Levitas, R. (2013) *Utopia as Method: the Imaginary Reconstitution of Society*. London: Palgrave Macmillan; Jacoby, R. (2005) *Picture Imperfect: Utopian Thought for an Anti-utopian Age.* New York: Columbia University Press; Sargent, L. T. (2011) *Utopianism: A Very Short Introduction.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

[14] ↩ Levitas, *The Concept of Utopia.*

[15] ↩ Bloch, E. (1986) *The Principle of Hope.* Oxford: Basil Blackwell (3 vols.)

Robinson.[16] The imagination of society otherwise is not, however, necessarily confined to fiction or science fiction; there are many non-fiction attempts to understand what a different society might look like, often in the guise of political programmes, or, in the contemporary world, consideration of what would be necessary for a sustainable society. This more holistic version of the utopian mode treats social arrangements, means of livelihood, ways of life, and their accompanying ethics as an indivisible system. Most of this paper is concerned with Utopia in this sense, because the problem we face is bringing about a transformed future.

Utopia encourages us to think differently, systemically, and concretely about possible futures.

There is, however, also a third way of thinking about Utopia which is relevant to the question of whom the agents of that transformation might be. This third meaning concerns prefigurative practice, that is, attempts to live out in this world the relationships and practices that might characterise an imagined better future.

Why Utopia?

Utopia encourages us to think differently, systemically, and concretely about possible futures. First, it allows us, in imagining an entirely different society, to break from the present at least in imagination. This break is not, of course absolute. Our imaginative reach is limited. Both the issues that preoccupy us and our posited transformations in response to them are heavily dependent on our social and historical circumstances. They are not wholly socially determined: as Roberto Unger has argued, human beings are shaped by their context, but also transcend it;[17] or, as Marx put it, we make our own history, but not under conditions of our own choosing. One of the reasons Marx refused overt utopianism was his recognition of the social formation of human beings, and thus the impossibility of predicting the needs, wants and capacities of future generations. This recognition of contingency, and of the dependence of our own beliefs, perceptions and ethics on our historical and social position, is one of the defining characteristics of modernity. There is a sense, then, in which all utopian speculation is about the present rather than the future. It addresses those issues that are of concern in the present, by projecting a different future in which they are resolved. Nevertheless, the degree of distance offered by Utopia is important. It enables a kind of double vision in which we can look not only from present to future, but from (potential) future to the present. The French sociologist André Gorz rightly argued that 'it is the function of utopias … to provide us with the distance from the existing state of affairs which allows us to judge what we are doing in the light of what we could or should do'.[18] His compatriot Miguel Abensour argued—specifically in relation to Morris's *News from Nowhere*—that the process of imagination also enables people to learn to want differently, by thinking and feeling themselves into an alternative world. He called this 'the education of desire'.[19]

Whereas political philosophy may begin from such abstract goods as justice, fairness, or equality, the sociological approach forces the question of how these are played out in practice.

Secondly, 'social utopias' imagine desired futures as holistic systems. They are in this sense a form of speculative sociology, for sociologists typically understand societies as complex systems, in which forms of work, the production of

[16] ↩ All of these authors wrote various fictional and/or nonfictional works with a utopian content. The key examples are these: Bellamy, E. (2003 [1888]) *Looking Backward* 2000-1887, Ontario: Broadbent; Morris, W. (1902 [1891]) *News from Nowhere*, London: Longmans Green and Co.; Gilman, C. P. (1979 [1915]) *Herland*, London: The Womens Press; Wells, H. G. (1905) *A Modern Utopia* London: Chapman Hall; Piercy, M. (1976) *Woman on the Edge of Time*, New York: Alfred A Knopf; Le Guin, Ursula (1974) T*he Dispossessed: an Ambiguous Utopia*, New York: Harper and Row.

[17] ↩ Roberto Unger has written various books that bear on these issues. See especially Unger, R.M. (1984) *Passion: An Essay on Personality*, New York: Free Press; Unger, R. M. (1998) *Democracy Realised: The Progressive Alternative*, London: Verso; Unger, R.M. (2007) *The Self Awakened: Pragmatism Unbound*, Cambridge, Mass. : Harvard University Press.

[18] ↩ Gorz, A. (1999) Reclaiming Work: *Beyond the Wage-Based Society*, Cambridge: Polity Press, p. 113.

[19] ↩Abensour, M. (1999) *'William Morris and the Politics of Romance'*, in Max Blechman (ed.) *Revolutionary Romanticism*, San Francisco: City Lights Books.

livelihoods, the distribution of the social product, education, forms of government, and belief systems including ethics are all necessarily interrelated. This approach lends itself to looking at the way an imagined society is embedded in the local and global ecology, even if sociologists have too often neglected this question.

Thirdly, this utopian-sociological perspective forces us to think in concrete terms. Whereas political philosophy may begin from such abstract goods as justice, fairness, or equality, the sociological approach forces the question of how these are played out in practice, how they are built into the design of social institutions and the actual processes of daily life. This may be particularly important for the question of our ethical relation to the future, since ethics, in this view, are not detachable from their social context—a point to which I will return.

Utopia as Method

Anti-utopian arguments represent Utopia as a plan which cannot be realised, and may give rise to violence. But most utopias are not plans; they are, rather, hypotheses. The process of speculation about a potential better future—what we might call the Imaginary Reconstitution of Society—is a method rather than a blueprint. Such a method has three modes. Firstly, there is the architectural mode, the imagination of an alternative society, discussed above. All utopias, in this sense, provoke critical responses. One may respond, 'I don't like that', for example to the fact that More's Utopia involves slavery. One may wonder, 'what about…?' in relation to any number of omissions and silences. The critique of Utopia is a necessary part of the process. That is why H. G. Wells said that the 'creation of Utopias – and their exhaustive criticism – is the necessary and distinctive method of sociology'.[20]

The expectations that govern behaviour in the present are fictional, and whether or not they are realistic, they are not real.

Second, this critique needs to be directed not only at utopias which are explicitly so owned by their proponents. There are utopias embedded in much social commentary which do not advertise or recognise themselves as such. For example, there is a conservative utopia focused on long-standing rootedness in (and ownership of) land at work in Roger Scruton's essay in this series.[21] There were and are utopias, ideas of a better world, underpinning the hopes of those voting for Brexit (including, but not limited to, a properly-funded health service) and those voting for Donald Trump. Utopias are widely at work in everyday life, for they form part of what sociologists call the 'social imaginary'—that is, the models we carry around in our heads of how the world does and/or should operate. Jens Beckert has shown how beliefs about the future are part and parcel of how financial markets work.[22] As Robinson puts it, 'It's a fragile system, based on mutual trust that it's sane, and as soon as that fiction breaks down, everyone sees it's crazy'.[23] The expectations that govern behaviour in the present are fictional, and whether or not they are realistic, they are not real. Bringing these implicit utopian models to public view and subjecting these, also, to exhaustive criticism is an equally important archaeological mode of the utopian method. Some of these may be presented not as the utopias their authors implied, but as dystopias.

All utopias, whether explicit or implicit have an embedded idea of what it means to be human, what is good for us and makes us happy.

[20] ↩ Wells, H. G. (1906) '*The So-called Science of Sociology*', Sociological Papers, 3: 367

[21] ↩Scruton, R. (2017) 'Settling Down and Marking Time', CUSP Essay Series on the Morality of Sustainable Prosperity No. 2., www.cusp.ac.uk/essay/m1-2. My differences with Scruton's position are much the same as they were in 1986. See R. Levitas ed. (1986) The Ideology of the New Right, Cambridge: Polity Press.

[22] ↩ Beckert, Jens (2016) *Imagined Futures: Fictional Expectations and Capitalist Dynamics,* Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.

[23] ↩ Robinson, New York 2140, p.433.

Thirdly, the Imaginary Reconstitution of Society, whether architectural or archaeological, has also an ontological aspect —meaning, simply, that all utopias, whether explicit or implicit have an embedded idea of what it means to be human, what is good for us and makes us happy.

It is evident that utopian ideas have a wide currency, even if they are not always recognised as such. Thinking of Utopia as a method rather than a plan reveals that utopian speculation is always subject to critique and is always, therefore, provisional. Most literary utopias are not regarded as an end point. Wells argues that what makes *A Modern Utopia* modern is its global reach and its 'kinetic' character, that is, its inbuilt process of change. Robinson says there are no happy endings because there are no endings. Bellamy's Looking Backward is a staging post. Morris's News from Nowhere is subtitled 'an epoch of rest' with the implication of further change. Morris also explicitly recognised that any utopian projection was, in part, an expression of the temperament of its author, and necessarily contained gaps and wrong turnings. In this respect, Morris was admirably reflexive about what he was doing. Tom Moylan has argued that the utopias of the later twentieth century, by such writers as Marge Piercy and Ursula Le Guin, incorporate and reflect these elements of provisionality and reflexivity. Given these limitations of utopian imagination, we would not expect any utopia we imagine to be implemented in its entirety, nor if we are wise would we want it to. Utopia is consequently necessarily characterised by failure—but this is a feature in its favour, not an argument against it. Utopia is a method rather than a plan, a process rather than a goal.

Presenting the Future

Understood as a method, utopia has no specific content, which is why Robinson's brief account of the society emerging after the debt strike invites readers to add their own demands. Moreover, since Utopia is not a plan, provisional versions of a better future must be negotiated collectively, raising questions about political organisation and agency. What I set out here, then, are simply some principles that will need to inform a just and sustainable future, bearing in mind Wells's stricture that Utopia now needs to be imagined as global. Ecological sustainability requires a huge reduction in carbon emissions, as well as a reduction in other environmental impacts. Social sustainability demands a reduction in global as well as national inequalities; a Piketty Tax would contribute to this. This is partly a matter of equity, and partly a matter of practicality: there will be forced migrations resulting from of climate change, but they will be reduced if the standards of living are not so widely disparate across regions. Aubrey Meyer writes of the need for 'contraction and convergence'—the need for consumption and emission levels to contract overall, but for the global differences in these to be reduced.

This implies greater reductions in the affluent West, and increases for the currently disadvantaged.[24] One approach to this is to call for a no-growth economy. I think this is mistaken on two counts. One is that in relation to carbon emissions, no growth is not an adequate target for the affluent West; reduction is required. The other is more fundamental. What we currently measure as 'growth' is not very useful except within the framework of constantly-expanding capitalism. The most common indicator, Gross Domestic Product (GDP) measures market activity, whether or not that activity is socially useful and whether or not it is environmentally destructive. The manufacture and sale of cigarettes counts to GDP, as does the cost of treating the resultant diseases. Conversely, GDP ignores work and activities that take place outside the market, such as informal child care and elder care, so 'growth' can be brought about by moving such activities from the informal to the formal sector.

A new society should not be approached as an era of puritanical self-denial, but a space in which new forms of satisfaction, especially in creativity and human relationships, become possible.

[24] ↩ Meyer, A. (2000) *Contraction and Convergence: The Global Solution to Climate Change*, Totnes: Green Books

There are other measures that have been devised, but are not in common use, such as the Index of Sustainable Economic Welfare and its successor the Measure of Domestic Progress, which include unpaid work and the negative effects of environmental impacts and social inequality. The New Economics Foundation compiles a Happy Planet Index which prioritises human and planetary well-being.[25] We should not concentrate on zero growth in conventional terms, but think seriously about what it is important to measure. I think we would then find that certain kinds of growth are quite compatible with reduced resource consumption and carbon emissions. John Ruskin and William Morris regarded much of what was produced in their own society as 'illth' rather than wealth, with the effort involved in its production described by Morris as 'useless toil' rather than 'useful work'.[26] A new society should not be approached as an era of puritanical self-denial, but a space in which new forms of satisfaction, especially in creativity and human relationships, become possible. The task is to imagine alternative ways of life that would be ecologically and socially sustainable and enable wider and deeper human happiness than is now possible. In such a society, 'the economy' or 'markets' are subordinate to the principles of the wider society. Indeed, from a sociological or systemic point of view there is no such thing as 'the economy': merely a complexity of social institutions and practices considered from an 'economic' point of view.

We cannot easily ask what principles would govern such a society, for that is to imply that the principles come first and the social structures emerge from them—when in fact our social processes affect our ethics at least as much. But we can ask what principles would be embedded in the society. Michael D. Higgins, President of the Irish Republic, wrote that 'In the short term it is necessary to stress again that standing as an alternative to the abstract entity of the markets is a form of society built on the principle of solidarity'.[27] In New York 2140 Robinson contrasts a Leopoldian land ethic[28] that entails doing what is good for the land with an ethic based simply on doing what is good for humans. The former, he says, is better for the planet, and better for us in the long run. An alternative is to think in terms of a care ethic. This approach was developed by feminist philosophers such as Carol Gilligan and sociologist Fiona Williams in the late twentieth century. It places care, benevolence and relationships at the centre of morality, thus making women and the 'private' sphere of family and community as central as the predominantly male 'public' sphere.

If our imagined future is to embed an ethic of care, we will need to value the activities we currently construe as 'caring' very differently. That is particularly salient right now, as the formal social care system in Britain is collapsing because of drastically inadequate public funding. Hospital beds are occupied by frail elderly for whom domiciliary or residential care arrangements cannot be made. 'Care' homes are closing and handing back contracts to local authorities because they are financially unsustainable, and cannot recruit staff at the low levels of pay deemed appropriate. The amount paid by local authorities for those in residential care without private means is so low that care places are cross-subsidised by over-charging those who are 'self-funding', which primarily means funding themselves out of the proceeds of selling their homes. Children who are 'in care' are referred to as 'looked-after' children—which generally means no-one is looking after them; outcomes for such young people are very poor in terms of educational achievement, mental health and future prospects. Much care of course takes place in the informal sector. The value placed on mothering is reflected in the fact that Britain has among the worst levels of maternity pay in Europe; widows' benefits are being curtailed and treated as transitional payments; tax credits for third and later children are being abolished; lone mothers on benefits are required to attend work-focused interviews when their youngest child is a year old, and to return to work when that child is three years old.

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[25] ↩ neweconomics.org/2006/07/happy-planet-index. Other New Economics Foundation publications can be found at http://neweconomics.org

[26] ↩ See Morris, W. (1884), *Useful Work versus Useless Toil,* https://www.marxists.org/archive/morris/works/1884/useful.htm

[27] ↩ Higgins, M. D. (2011) *Renewing the Republic,* Dublin: Liberties Press, p. 61.

[28] ↩ https://www.aldoleopold.org/about/the-land-ethic/

An ethic of care would need to be embedded in thinking about work not just in terms of market activity, but in terms of what Miriam Glucksmann called the Total Social Organization of Labour—that is, all work across both formal and informal sectors.[29] This approach is also echoed by feminist economists such as Marilyn Waring, who note the absence of non-marketised work from national accounting.[30] It implies seeing everything that is done or produced as a collective social good. It challenges the morality of distribution on market principles. It points in the direction of two further features: basic income and equality. Higgins says that even in the short term, the principle of solidarity means 'establishing a floor of citizenship below which no citizen would be allowed to fall', and that 'in a republic, the right to shelter, food security, education, a good environment, and freedom from fear and insecurity from childhood to old age, must be the benchmarks'.[31] In 1999, Gorz argued that an unconditional income adequate for a decent existence in the society in question was the only basis for the effective validation of, and adequate recompense for, caring, voluntary and non-market activities.[32] There are, of course, many questions to be resolved here about the level of basic income in any one country (assuming nation-states to survive at all), let alone their global variation—pointing us back to a reduction in global, as well as local or national, inequalities. And then, besides an income floor, there would be an income ceiling: Robinson suggests this in his earlier novel, *Pacific Edge*.[33]

An ethic of care changes what we regard as work and how it is rewarded.

An ethic of care changes what we regard as work and how it is rewarded. In the conditions of full equality of condition aspired to by William Morris, all forms of work would be de-monetized. This is the aspiration drawn in different ways by Morris, Bellamy and Gilman in their respective utopias. Short of this, however, basic income would free people to think about what they really wanted to do, and not force them into low paid tasks or zero-hours contracts. Freedom from compulsion necessarily implies changes in the meaning, content and structure of work away from mere productivity to the exercise and extension of our capacities and capabilities. John Bellamy Foster has written in this series about Ruskin and Morris and their view of good work, involving heart and hand and mind.[34] This applies not just to the handicrafts that were Morris's preoccupation. Coordination of brain, eye and hand is involved in musicianship, sport, parenting, and developing open-source software as well as carpentry and pattern design; and we should regard caring itself as a craft. Craftsmanship is a long-term matter. It involves many hours of practice, together with a commitment to doing the best possible work for its own sake. It is antithetical to the neoliberal requirement of employability through 'reskilling' to the shifting requirements of the market.[35]

Cash incomes are only part of the foundation of a greater equality of condition and the freedom from constant anxiety that frees people to live fully. People also need housing, education, healthcare and other public services. This raises the question of scale. Currently there is a prevalent anti-statism and preference for the local. If some enterprises might sensibly be organised as small-scale cooperatives, others cannot. We will still need hospitals, factories and schools, transport, energy and water infrastructure, and skilled people to build and operate these. Moves to more localised production, such as farming on the roofs of buildings and in small urban spaces, will not remove the need for global and national coordination, and thus for global, supranational and national institutions, and forms of public accountability. The state remains necessary, though not as the debt-collector for global capitalism that it has become.[36] Basic income

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29 ↩ Glucksmann, M. (1995) 'Why "Work"? Gender and the "Total Social Organization of Labour"', *Gender Work and Organization*, 2:2: 63-75.

30 ↩ Marilyn Waring (1988) *If Women Counted*, London: Macmillan

31 ↩Higgins, M. D. (2011) *Renewing the Republic*, Dublin: Liberties Press, p. 61.

32 ↩ Gorz, A. (1999) *Reclaiming Work*.

33 ↩Robinson, K. S. (1995) *Pacific Edge*, St Martins Press.

34 ↩ John Bellamy Foster (2017) 'The Meaning of Work in a Sustainable Society: The Jus Semper Global Alliance, June 2019 TJSGA/TLWNSI Essay/SD (E020)

35 ↩ See Sennett, R. (2008) *The Craftsman*, London: Penguin

36 ↩ Streeck, W. (2016) *How Will Capitalism End*?: Essays on a Failing System, London: Verso.

requires an enabling state, while a regulatory state is needed to curtail wasteful production and consumption or polluting practices. Whatever self-organisation is achieved at local level, as Harvey says, 'there is no way that an anti-capitalist social order can be constructed without seizing state power, radically transforming it and reworking the constitutional and institutional framework that currently supports private property, the market system and endless capital accumulation'.[37] Social and ecological sustainability and an ethic of care require no less; and if you don't have a dream, how can you have a dream come true?

Utopia offers a base outside from which to critically observe the present.

Ethical claims and political actions

I have spread my dreams under your feet. Tread softly because you tread on my dreams, wrote Yeats; but also, *In dreams begins responsibility*.[38] We cannot 'prove' that we have a responsibility for the future, or a responsibility to meet our own needs in a way that does not compromise the capacity of future generations to meet theirs. Even strong libertarians, however, generally hold that people should be free to act as they please provided they do not adversely affect others. Curiously, this does not necessarily translate into an ethic of meeting their own needs and desires in ways that do not impinge on others, even those living at the same time. If it did, we would not see the levels of inequality that we do. The issue here is precisely that raised by the exhortation to love thy neighbour as thyself: who is my neighbour? One response here is that our actions in the present inevitably help to determine what kind of future will emerge. As Bloch put it, 'the hinge in human history is its producer'.[39] Utopia helps us here too, by providing that double vision between present and future. We can imagine a future society with a different ethic, and look at our own practices from that standpoint. Utopia offers a base outside from which to critically observe the present. This imagined future is the projection forward of traces, such as an ethic of care, which already exist, albeit embryonically. At the same time, it is a contradiction of the growth-based, profit-based, property-based, ecologically damaging present.

The relationship between the ethic of that putative future and our action in the present is not straightforward. It may be taken as a template for our life now. Paul describes members of the early Christian churches as 'citizens of heaven' and as 'ambassadors'—citizens of one place dwelling in another, representing that other place, and crucially, bound to act in ways that bring that better state into being.[40] The same theme was present in Alex Hartley's 2012 art project 'Nowhere Island'. As part of the Cultural Olympiad, an island formed of rocks newly uncovered by receding glaciers (and thus not subject to existing territorial claims) was towed around the British coast as the ostensible basis for a new nation, recruiting 'citizens of Nowhere'.[41] The slogan of the 1960s and 1970s 'the personal is political', meant the same thing, as does the more recent exhortation to 'be the change you wish to see'. Just as a collective life which sits more lightly on the planet should not be presented as one of deprivation, the implication of living for the future should be conceived positively. Roberto Unger puts it like this: 'to live for the future is to live in the present as a being not wholly determined by the present settings of organised life and thought and therefore more capable of openness to the other person, to the surprising experience, and to … time and change'.[42]

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[37] ↩ Harvey, D. (2010) *The Enigma of Capital*, London: Profile, p. 256

[38] ↩ Yeats, W. B. (1899) *He Wishes for the Cloths of Heaven*, poemhunter.com/poem/he-wishes-for-the-cloths-of-heaven/. 'In dreams begins responsibility' (which is quoted by Robinson) was the epigraph to Yeats's 1914 collection *Responsibilities*.

[39] ↩Bloch, E. (1986) *The Principle of Hope*, p. 249.

[40] ↩Corinthians II 5:20; Philippians 3:20

[41] ↩For more information on Hartley's project, see http://nowhereisland.org/

[42] ↩Unger, R. M (2007) *The Self Awakened*, p.150.

These claims are, then, not primarily about the individual pursuit of moral purity, but about fostering attitudes and behaviours that will build a better world as well as enhance this one. The possibility of behaving according to an ethic of care in a society not structured around this is limited. Situations shape aspirations. If you remove social provision, people will be more anxious to accumulate private resources; if you destroy public transport, people will use their cars more; if you under-fund education and health, those who can will be more likely to opt for private provision. If you do not collectively provide adequate social care, and rely instead on exhorting people to 'plan' financially to provide this for themselves, those who can will hoard resources, and inequalities will widen. Yet both Christians and socialists are regularly accused of hypocrisy for accommodating to the world in which they actually live. Most do not sell all their goods and give to the poor. Marx is sometimes ludicrously criticised for sending his daughters to a private school, in a historical context where education was not otherwise available. William Morris was castigated for being a capitalist; his very considered struggle with this question was that disposal of his assets would make no difference to the system as a whole, which he campaigned tirelessly to change. Today, enormously rich politicians hurl accusations of hypocrisy at the educational choices others make for their children, attempting to divert attention from the real question of the best educational system for all.

Utopian experiments are attempts to live collectively according to a different ethic.

The personal may be political, but it is not political enough. Utopian experiments are attempts to live collectively according to a different ethic—whether in terms of family structures, environmental impact, or both. Such 'real utopias' as Erik Olin Wright calls them,[43] or prefigurative practices as I would term them, may not be separate communities; they may be trials of such practices as basic income schemes. While they provide spaces where those who choose may live (partly) differently, they are also testing grounds for alternative ideas for the future. They are always constrained by the wider context, and pulled between withdrawal from and transformation of the society in which they exist. Roberto Unger writes of processes of collective improvisation or democratic experimentalism. Importantly, these do not just 'test' what is possible, for people change themselves in the process, and new possibilities, both for persons and for the future, are opened up. For Unger, what I would call Utopia is simply a direction of travel towards the future, determined collectively. It was collective failure that led to the ecological catastrophe of New York 2140; it was collective action against the financial systems many decades later that opened up the possibility of greater human security and equality.

The problem of the future is not so much ethical as political. We need to imagine sustainable prosperity, in a way that re-imagines what it means to prosper and thrive, and which enables us to envisage a society in which that will become possible. This imagined better future is not a plan to be implemented, but a beacon of hope and possibility, calling us to account and standing in judgement over the present. Yet we necessarily act in that present. As we do so, the real and imagined possibilities for the future will change. We need to sustain that double vision between present and future, that grasp of our own situation and of utopian possibility, and find ways of acting collectively to redeem the future. And if we fail? Turn again to Yeats, for a prediction which is scarcely even a projection into that future:

Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.[44]

[43] ↩Wright, E. O (2010) *Envisioning Real Utopias*, London: Verso

[44] ↩Yeats, W. B. (1919) *The Second Coming*, http://www.potw.org/archive/potw351.html.

Useful links:

- The Jus Semper Global Alliance
- Álvaro J. de Regil: Transitioning to Geocratia the People and Planet and Not the Market Paradigm — First Steps
- Paul Burkett: An Eco-Revolutionary Tipping Point? Global Warming, the Two Climate Denials, and the Environmental Proletariat
- Michael Löwy: Why Ecosocialism: For a Red-Green Future
- John Bellamy Foster: The Long Ecological Revolution
- John Bellamy Foster: Marxism and Ecology
- John Bellamy Foster: The Meaning of Work in a Sustainable Society
- Ingrid Robeyns: Freedom and Responsibility - Sustainable Prosperity through a Capabilities Lens
- Víctor Toledo: What are we saying when we talk about sustainability?

❖ **About Jus Semper:** The Jus Semper Global Alliance aims to contribute to achieving a sustainable ethos of social justice in the world, where all communities live in truly democratic environments that provide full enjoyment of human rights and sustainable living standards in accordance with human dignity. To accomplish this, it contributes to the liberalisation of the democratic institutions of society that have been captured by the owners of the market. With that purpose, it is devoted to research and analysis to provoke the awareness and critical thinking to generate ideas for a transformative vision to materialise the truly democratic and sustainable paradigm of People and Planet and NOT of the market.

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