

Things Are Heating Up: Reflections on *Utopia, Dystopia and Climate Change*, the 20th International Conference of the Utopian Studies Society, Europe

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Abstract

This article offers a short scholarly reflection on the 20th international conference of the Utopian Studies Society, themed around utopia, dystopia and climate change, and hosted by Monash University's European centre in Prato, Italy. Engaging with numerous threads which emerged organically across multiple panels, this article positions the notions of change, resistance, and activism within the heart of the conference's focus. In doing so, it relates the implications of these discussions to the wider ecological future of the planet, asking how utopian ideals are enacted, challenged and expanded in a time of global crisis. Simultaneously, it turns its gaze inwards, applying its thinking to the structures of the conference and Society itself, asking how utopian principles may be practised within the workings of utopian studies itself, as well as the wider academic field.

Keywords: utopian studies, conference, reflection, climate change

Hot on the Heels of Climate Action: Reflecting on utopia

Today is Friday, 20th September 2019, and I find myself drafting this conference report as Greta Thunberg and her fellow pupils lead marches on the streets of cities across the globe, in an inspiring day of climate change activism. An opportune moment, then, to reflect on the Utopian Studies Society's annual conference, themed around utopia, dystopia and climate change, and held this year between July 1st and 5th at Monash University's European base in Prato, Italy.¹ A five-day event cannot really be given the justice or detail it deserves, especially from the perspective of one single attendee. What follows, then, is an interpretation of the conference's major leitmotifs; a tracing, and tying together, of its most resonant issues and impassioned ideas.

As evidenced from the barrage of references, alternately comical and despairing, made during keynote speeches, panel discussions, and lunch breaks, the background commentary to the conference was its (un)fortuitous coinciding with an extended European heatwave. Featuring record-breaking temperatures, governmental warnings, and numerous heat-related deaths, the news offered attendees an unavoidable, and sweltering, reminder of the immediacy of the climate breakdown crisis; July 2019 is now on record as the hottest month in recorded global history (**Letzter 2019**). Climate change thus surrounded and penetrated the conference, as both theme and mood. This meant that, along with the heat, certain questions became pressing: in an age of anthropocentric climate collapse, what value is utopia? How might utopian processes contribute to arresting environmental decline? Is utopian thought in of itself a valuable pursuit, or should the field be tied to a more direct activism? These issues were threaded throughout many of the reflections and responses offered during the conference: if the future is truly at stake, then this conference implicitly attempted to locate utopia's place in addressing that imperilment and assess its ability to help build a better tomorrow.

Hot Topics: Community, capitalism, and countering bias

Proceedings began in a manner of which Thunberg would doubtless approve: we listened to the science. Jacqueline Dutton (*University of Melbourne*) opened the conference with a warm and genuine greeting to all attendees, before introducing David Holmes (*Monash University*), who delivered a welcome address that was rooted in empirical data and lived experience. Directly referencing the unprecedented heat, he situated the conference's current climate in relation to patterns of increasingly extreme weather, and explained in detail many of the myths, mysteries and mutations of ecological collapse. Turning to his own work as Director of the *Climate Change Communication Research Hub*ⁱⁱ, Holmes introduced his audience to the model of interpretive communities, analysing the public's response to the threat of climate change. Citing Hine (**et al, 2013**), Holmes highlights the diversity of opinion on climate science, positioning public responses into descriptive groups such as *alarmed*, *concerned*, and *dismissive*, before discussing how each of these positions may be influenced, positively or otherwise, by various media. Aside from a relative degree of nausea at the scale of both the crisis itself and the lack of understanding in certain communities, often underpinned by economic factors reinforcing poverty and suspicion, the recurring message in Holmes' opening address was one of optimism, and an appraisal of climate change fiction as a potent delivery system for educative and emotive ideas which might shift the balance of understanding in favour of positive change. While the efficacy of utopian literature over, or versus, direct

activism would be frequently debated over the coming week, Holmes' introductory remarks helpfully intertwined the concept of utopian thinking with the realities of climate change, encouraging attendees to continually interrogate how the former might impact the latter.

Such ideas resonated throughout the conference, not least in the succeeding keynote talks, first by Lisa Garforth (*Newcastle University*), who argued in favour of utopia's relevance and malleability, and second by Darko Suvin, whose landmark publication *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction* (1977) legitimised the field of science fiction studies. A highlight of the week and presented to standing room only, Suvin gave an impassioned and wide-reaching keynote speech, which touched on several underlying questions emerging from the conference by re-asserting the primacy of utopian thinking in challenging both climate and cultural collapse. Following Jason Moore's rejection of the term *Anthropocene* in favour of *Capitalocene* as the label best suited to capture the pervasive system of 'power, profit and re/production' that exacerbates climate collapse, Suvin indicted neoliberal, Western economic practices which have fuelled environmental catastrophe (**Moore, 2017: 594**). He also interlinked personal experiences of mid-twentieth century fascism with a resurgent 'fascism 2.0', towards which he believes capitalism is inevitably sliding; for Suvin, there can be no capitalist utopia.

This critique of capitalism was echoed and expanded upon across numerous panels: Nicole Pohl's (*Oxford Brookes University*) fantastic talk on the transformative power of utopian literature highlighted the role of the Global North in encouraging climate breakdown while simultaneously being more inured against its effects in comparison to third-world countries; similarly, in a panel on climate literature and indigeneity, Kirsten Bussière (*University of Ottawa*) brilliantly noted that for indigenous communities, ecocatastrophe contains different connotations due to a history of apocalyptic change via imperialism and oppression. For both her and Pohl, utopian storytelling provides vital pathways for both transmitting and critiquing knowledge and ideas, especially in relation to ruined futures.

In other talks, the value of utopian thinking was more overtly challenged. In a lively discussion, Darren Webb (*University of Sheffield*) made the case against the domestication of utopia: for him, utopia has been tamed, its framework directed primarily towards analysis as opposed to transformation: as he put it, 'a once dangerous creature has become a pet'. The only appropriate utopian response to climate change, he argued, is an activist response. Webb's indictment of the field prompted significant discussion: while some agreed with his assessment, others defended the value of academic study, praising its capacity for independent, rigorous

analysis to enrich public engagement. Others, including Siân Adiseshiah (*Loughborough University*), leading the charge in a well-received and insightful contribution on the same panel as Webb, challenged the language of domestication, highlighting its negatively gendered connotations and calling instead for a reframing of the field in more inclusive terms.

Adiseshiah's call to redefine and expand what we understand by utopia was revisited and reframed across several discussions, not least in her own paper in utopia and drama, where she argued for a reconsideration of the value of live performance to utopian thought, which has been typically ignored or even outright dismissed in favour of the literary mode. Similarly, Laura de Simoni (*University of Nottingham*) chose to centre her superb examination of dystopia in contemporary British theatre around the work of female playwright Lucy Kirkwood, while also directly countering the void of theatrical utopian dialogue by constructing her own terminology from dramatic and science fictional discourses. This thread of challenging utopian boundaries re-emerged in a particularly galvanising and collaboratively curated panel during the last day of the conference, with excellent collective contributions from Chelsea Haith (*Oxford University*), Rachel Hill (*Goldsmiths*) and Katie Stone (*Birkbeck*), who also consistently proved herself one of the conference's best and most prolific live-tweeters.ⁱⁱⁱ Together, the panel placed influential female writers such as Margaret Atwood and Ursula K. Le Guin in conversation with their counterparts from indigenous, diasporic and African cultures, aiming to highlight the quality of feminist writing and critique that runs through utopian practice 'from margin to centre', as their joint abstract proclaimed. By my own subjective, and completely unverifiable measurement, the American, and Caucasian, male, author Kim Stanley Robinson remained the conference's most prolifically discussed figure; this panel offered a fresh perspective and welcome intervention, going some way to redressing the balance.

Hot Take: How (not) to conference during the climate crisis

Elsewhere, the very structures and practices of the conference were rightfully examined with a view to exposing and correcting bias: in response to previous events, this year the Utopian Studies Society attempted to address implicit imbalances within its own workings, by instigating guidelines for panel chairs to take questions in the first instance from female-identifying audience members. This seemed a necessary, if relatively simple, step towards more equitable, dare we say, utopian, academic discussions; however, its results occasionally made for grim reading. Monitoring discussion time via a website designed to track responses along gender lines^{iv}, Jac Cattaneo (*Brighton Film School*) noted

on Twitter that respondents to Suvin's keynote speech were skewed in favour of male speakers by a startling 97 percent (**Cattaneo 2019**). While the metrics of this measurement do not necessarily reflect engagement across the entire week, these results nevertheless point towards unresolved, even unregistered issues of academic bias; and in response, the steps already implemented by the Society should be explicitly regarded as the first of many.

Other conference practices offered similar food for thought: each morning began with the organising committee chair Andrew Milner (*Monash University*) delivering a humorous, if increasingly exasperated, update on the whereabouts of the attendants' name badges, which remained stubbornly absent from the conference, apparently en route to Prato, from Singapore via Lufthansa; paraphrasing the famous song, he repeatedly informed us that 'Yes! We have no nametags'. If one were being critical, one might speculate that the carbon footprint incurred by both printing and shipping these nametags from abroad was, in light of the conference's focus on climate change, perhaps an insensible choice. Indeed, if one were being particularly harsh, one might follow this argument to its logical end, and weigh up whether the cumulative effects of hundreds of attendees making cross-continental flights could be considered in direct opposition to their collective desire to tackle climate change. If utopian thinking is equated with radical thinking, or, as some attendees proposed, with radical action, then it would be beneficial to explore how the very fabric of conferences – their organisation, preparation and presentation – can be fundamentally reimagined. Indeed, if Thunberg is courageous enough to walk out of the classroom, perhaps we should follow in her footsteps and challenge our own practice, on every level, however ingrained.

Yet if one temporarily sets aside these reservations, it is not difficult to conclude that the conference and wider Society provide an engaging opportunity to continue pursuing utopian change, within both its own systems and across contemporary culture. For evidence of its success in these endeavours, one would only need to scan social media to find numerous positive responses, each viewing the conference as an essential re-energising of utopian discussion. This was perhaps best demonstrated through the welcoming atmosphere extended to postgraduate and early career researchers. As part of a dedicated postgraduate programme, Gregory Claeys (*Royal Holloway*) delivered a wide-ranging talk on academia, distilling for his audience a lifetime of experience regarding writing, editing, redrafting, presenting, and publishing. Joining him was Gareth Johnson (*University of Warwick*) who offered exciting provocations with regards to the publishing industry, challenging his audience to question and disrupt typical channels of knowledge-sharing. A final

postgraduate researcher event brought together the editors of several utopian studies journals, each of whom described their work in detail and encouraged attendees to both submit work and become involved in reviewing and editing processes. The spirit of these engagements was decidedly utopian: just as Garforth's plenary suggested that utopian ideals were always readily available, then it was an act of generosity by both the Society's postgraduate committee and assembled editorial teams to pass these ideals down.

A productive, occasionally problematised, but ultimately invigorating week, then: an opportunity to reassess and re-energise the field of utopian studies, and ready ourselves for the challenges of what Rob Nixon famously termed the 'slow violence' of climate change: just as the forces of ecological collapse are 'often not just attritional but also exponential', so too can utopian futures sustain and multiply themselves through the pooling and sharing of collective utopian thought and action, in contexts such as this conference (**2011: 3**). Recognised in 2014 for her lifetime contribution to American literature, Ursula K. Le Guin noted that 'we live in capitalism, its power seems inescapable – but then, so did the divine right of kings. Any human power can be resisted and changed by human beings' (**Guardian 2014**). If climate breakdown is similarly pervasive and tentacular, then utopian studies continues to offer a site of both reflection and resistance; a space in which radical change can be imagined and enacted.

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Endnotes

- ⁱ <https://utopian-studies-europe.org/conference/>
- ⁱⁱ <https://monash.edu/mcccrh>
- ⁱⁱⁱ https://twitter.com/cyborg_feminist/status/1145962730328903680
- ^{iv} <http://arentalkingtoomuch.com/>