

Queer Theory and Utopianism

What is the relationship of queer theory to utopianism?

Given their mutual interest in challenging dominant norms, values, and institutions, it may seem obvious that queer theory would share affinities with utopian thought. Determining what precisely these affinities consist in is, however, a less straightforward matter. In order to understand them, we will need to consider the twin careers of queer theory and utopianism over the last few decades.

It is a striking fact that the flourishing of the first wave of queer theory in the 1980s and 90s coincided with the demise of utopianism within wider culture. Theorists from David Harvey to Fredric Jameson have explained this drying up of utopian energy in terms of the turn toward post-Fordism followed by the rise of neoliberalism.¹ Others, such as Ruth Levitas and Slavoj Žižek, have emphasised the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 as key factors in the widely proclaimed ‘death’ of utopia.² Meanwhile, in their analyses of the cultural politics of the period, Franco Berardi and Mark Fisher each write of the widespread sense of ‘the cancellation of the future’ as it became increasingly hard to envisage plausible alternatives to capitalism during these decades.³

As James Ingram notes, this anti-utopian sense of stagnation meant that critics of the status quo found it necessary to seize on ‘ever thinner, weaker, and vaguer’ utopian moments as the possibility of tangible, real-world change receded from view.⁴ Utopianism thus tended to become highly abstract and emptied of content: rather than anticipating a better society or the liberation of specific human energies, the focus of much utopian discourse increasingly became the bare possibility of change itself – the intimation that things might, somehow, someday be otherwise.

A case in point is that of Jameson’s *Archaeologies of the Future*, where it is suggested that, in light of the failed utopian projects of the twentieth century, ‘the slogan of anti-anti-Utopianism might well offer the best working strategy’ for those on the left today.⁵ On this view, rearguard action against the dystopian tendencies of late capitalism, combined with fleeting glimpses of utopian hope found scattered amidst works of literature and popular culture, may be as close to utopia as we are able to come.

This anti-utopian turn was arguably foreshadowed in certain respects by the work of Michel Foucault, who, in response to an interviewer’s question about why he had not sketched a utopia, notoriously replied that ‘to imagine another system is to extend our participation in the present system.’⁶

In their book, *The Last Man Takes LSD: Foucault and the End of Revolution*, Mitchell Dean and Daniel Zamora show that this outlook was the result of a growing sense of exhaustion with system building,

¹ See David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); and Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1991).

² See Ruth Levitas, *The Concept of Utopia*, 2nd edn. (Oxfordshire: Peter Lang, 2011), pp. ix–xv; and Slavoj Žižek, *In Defense of Lost Causes* (London: Verso, 2008).

³ See Franco Berardi, *After the Future*, eds. Gary Genosko and Nicholas Thoburn (Edinburgh and Oakland, Baltimore: AK Press, 2011); and Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism* (London: Zero, 2009).

⁴ James D. Ingram, Introduction, *Political Uses of Utopia: New Marxist, Anarchist, and Radical Democratic Perspectives*, eds. S. D. Chrostowska and James D. Ingram (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), p. xvi.

⁵ Fredric Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions* (London: Verso, 2007), xvi.

⁶ Michel Foucault, ‘Revolutionary Action: Until Now,’ in *Language, Counter-Memory and Practice*, ed. Donald F. Bouchard (New York: Cornell University Press, 1977), p. 230.

utopian dreaming, and grand visions of the future in the latter half of the twentieth century.⁷ In place of revolution, they argue, Foucault proposed a turn toward the self and a focus on micro-political as opposed to systemic change. Foucault's late masterwork, *The History of Sexuality*, published in several volumes between 1976 and 1984, is representative of this inward turn. It was also to be one of the main sources of inspiration for what was to become known as queer theory.

In this context, it is worth noting that a related criticism to that levelled by Ingram at the diminished utopianism of the 80s and 90s has also been made of first-wave queer theory. A good example of this is Rosemary Hennessy's book *Profit and Pleasure*, in which Hennessy criticises what she sees as the tendency of theorists like Judith Butler and Eve Sedgwick to separate gender and sexuality from capitalism and class.⁸ Such an approach is problematic, firstly, because it dehistoricises gender and sexuality by untethering them from the development of capitalism, and, secondly, because it dematerialises them by emphasising their cultural construction while neglecting socioeconomic factors such as the changing nature of wage labour or the origins of the modern family.

Hennessy is one of a number of critics who see queer theory's way of engaging gender and sexuality as restrictive and as leading to difficulties in situating queer identity and politics in relation to broader social developments.⁹ Although they do not generally frame these limitations in terms of a failure of the utopian imagination, a parallel may be drawn between these writers' critique of queer theory, on the one hand, and critiques of the turn toward micro-politics during the 80s and 90s by commentators like Dean and Zamora, on the other.

Just as utopianism dwindled to little more than a wisp of possibility during the neoliberal era, so first-wave queer theory represents for some of its critics a retreat from large-scale social critique in favour of a preoccupation with individual self-fashioning, leaving it susceptible to commodification and the dilution of its radical potential.

These are serious charges. There are nevertheless a number of replies that queer theorists might make in response to them.

A first would start by noting that, as queer theorists themselves, critics like Hennessy are contributors to the enterprise they find fault with. Insofar as their own class-based analysis of gender and sexuality is successful (as it arguably is), they thereby demonstrate that queer theory is able to encompass economic considerations. Although this does not constitute a defence of earlier theorists, it does help to demonstrate the flexibility of queer theory and the possibility of broadening its scope beyond the categories of gender and sexuality. Queer of color critique, which addresses the intersection of gender, sexuality, and race, has likewise contested some of queer theory's guiding assumptions and highlighted further blindspots from a position within queer theory itself.

A second reply would be to point out that some queer theorists have been concerned with capitalism and class since the inception of the field in the early 1980s. To take one prominent example, John D'Emilio was producing groundbreaking analysis of socioeconomic factors in the formation of queer subjectivity in articles such as 'Capitalism and Gay Identity' as early as 1983.¹⁰ In the following decade,

⁷ Mitchell Dean and Daniel Zamora, *The Last Man Takes LSD: Foucault and the End of Revolution* (London: Verso, 2021).

⁸ Rosemary Hennessy, *Profit and Pleasure: Sexual Identities in Late Capitalism*, 2nd edn. (New York: Routledge, 2017).

⁹ Related issues have been raised about queer theory by James Penney in *After Queer Theory: The Limits of Sexual Politics* (London: Pluto, 2014), which makes the case for the need for a critical return to Marxism on the part of queer theorists.

¹⁰ John D'Emilio, 'Capitalism and Gay Identity', in *The Gay and Lesbian Studies Reader*, eds. Michele Aina, Barale, David M. Halperin, and Henry Abelove (New York: Routledge, 1993), pp. 467–476.

Lisa Duggan analysed the depoliticisation of gay identity in articles like ‘The New Homonormativity: The Sexual Politics of Neoliberalism.’¹¹

The main contention of D’Emilio’s ‘Capitalism and Gay Identity’ is that ‘only when individuals began to make their living through wage labor, instead of as parts of an interdependent family unit, was it possible for homosexual desire to coalesce into a personal identity – an identity based on the ability to remain outside the heterosexual family and to construct a personal life based on attraction to one’s own sex.’ This, in turn, ‘made possible the formation of urban communities of lesbians and gay men and, more recently, of a politics based on a sexual identity.’¹²

D’Emilio’s account of the origin of gay identity is not deterministic: he does not claim that an alteration in economic life *caused* gay identity to come into existence. Rather, his argument is that until specific historical conditions arose there was no ‘social space’ for such an identity to occupy. D’Emilio shows that while same-sex *desire* is present in the historical record prior to the nineteenth century, homosexuality as an *identity* – as a way of being and of relating to others – is not. As even this brief sketch hopefully illustrates, D’Emilio’s work provides a *prima facie* reason to think that queer theory need not neglect economic considerations.

A third reply to critics of queer theory’s limited political scope would be to reconsider some of its foundational texts. Reflecting on her classic study *Gender Trouble* a decade on from its original publication, Butler commented that ‘the aim of the text was to open up the field of possibility for gender without dictating which kinds of possibilities ought to be realized.’¹³ The possibilities in question have to do with ways of performing gender, and the scope for subversion of established gender roles and styles. It is true, as Hennessy argues, that both *Gender Trouble* and its sequel, *Bodies that Matter*, focus almost exclusively on gender and sexuality and that neither offers anything like a systematic analysis of their relationship to capitalism or class. Whether this constitutes as decisive a shortcoming as Hennessy believes is less clear, however.

‘One might wonder,’ Butler writes, ‘what use “opening up possibilities” finally is, but no one who has understood what it is to live in the social world as what is “impossible,” illegible, unrealizable, unreal, and illegitimate is likely to pose that question.’¹⁴ This is a suggestive observation that may point to a way of reappraising not only *Gender Trouble* but Butler’s work more generally. While taking the invalidation of certain ways of performing gender as its ostensible focus, the remark registers a concern with illegibility and illegitimacy that has continued to inform Butler’s work.

In her books *Precarious Life* and *Notes toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*, Butler incorporates economic marginalisation into her analysis and provides an insightful account of the condition of precarity, which she defines as differential exposure to economic insecurity, violence, and forced migration.¹⁵ In light of these and other works, it has become possible to identify a persisting preoccupation on Butler’s part with the ways in which social value and legitimacy are assigned to or withheld from different groups, whether on the basis of gender, sexuality, race, class, immigration status, or some combination of these.

The examples of D’Emilio and Butler serve to illustrate the social and political reach of queer theory. Recent years, however, have seen the rise of a more overtly utopian style of queer theory. Work in this vein explicitly repudiates the anti-utopianism of the neoliberal era and is influenced as much by

¹¹ Lisa Duggan, ‘The New Homonormativity: The Sexual Politics of Neoliberalism,’ in *Materializing Democracy: Toward a Revitalized Cultural Politics*, eds. Dana D. Nelson and Russ Castronovo (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2002), pp. 175–194.

¹² D’Emilio, p. 470.

¹³ Judith Butler, Preface, *Gender Trouble*, 2nd edn. (New York: Routledge, 1999), pp. vii–viii.

¹⁴ Butler, p. viii.

¹⁵ Judith Butler, *Precarious Life* (London: Verso, 2004) and *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015).

traditions of radical queer activism and historical events such as the Compton's Cafeteria riot and Stonewall as by Foucault's *History of Sexuality*.

Published in 2009, José Esteban Muñoz's *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, an important example of queer of color critique, articulates a hopeful, future-oriented alternative to what Muñoz sees as the resignation and political timidity of queer culture since the turn of the millennium.

Distinguishing between LGBT pragmatism and queer utopianism, Muñoz argues that in focusing on objectives like gay marriage or securing the right of trans people to serve in the military, the queer community has lost sight of the utopian aspirations that inspired activists of the 1960s and 70s. For Muñoz, the aim of queer politics ought to be nothing less than the achievement of a world no longer structured by heteronormativity or white supremacy, however remote such a goal may appear from our present dystopian vantage. Even if *Cruising Utopia* does not offer the kind of concrete detail required to realise such a project, it is clearly a long way from the micro-political tinkering associated with queer theory by some of its critics.

A very different but no less utopian form of queer theory is found in *The Xenofeminist Manifesto*, originally published online in 2015 and authored by a collective of six authors working under the name Laboria Cuboniks. Characterised by Emily Jones as 'a feminist ethics for the technomaterial world',¹⁶ xenofeminism is a queer technofeminism committed to trans liberation and gender abolition, by which is meant the construction of 'a society where traits currently assembled under the rubric of gender, no longer furnish a grid for the asymmetric operation of power.'¹⁷

The ethos of the manifesto is well captured by its subtitle: 'a politics for alienation'. Those seeking radical change must embrace 'alienation' through the recognition that nothing is natural. While acknowledging the cultural construction of gender, the manifesto insists that materiality and biology must likewise not be taken as givens: they can be intervened in through surgery, hormone therapies, and alterations to the built environment. As experiments in free and open-source medicine on the part of feminists, gender hacktivists, and trans DIY-HRT forums demonstrate, technologies so far captured by capital may yet be repurposed as part of an anti-capitalist, anti-patriarchal project in which 'women, queers, and the gender non-conforming play an unparalleled role.'¹⁸

Written in a self-consciously hyperbolic style and blending promethean rhetoric with quasi-science fictional projections of post-capitalist emancipation, *The Xenofeminist Manifesto* is as exhilarating as it is wildly ambitious.

What, then, is the relationship of queer theory to utopianism? Based on our brief consideration of some of queer theory's more utopian elements, it is reasonable to draw two provisional conclusions: that queer theory may have more in common with utopian thought than is often assumed, and that there are signs of a more explicit utopian turn taking place within queer theory today. It remains to be seen how far the latter will inform future queer politics.

¹⁶ Emily Jones, 'Feminist Technologies and Post-Capitalism: Defining and Reflecting Upon Xenofeminism,' *Feminist Review*, Vol. 123, Issue. 1 (2019), p. 127.

¹⁷ Laboria Cuboniks, *The Xenofeminist Manifesto* (London: Verso, 2018), p. 55.

¹⁸ Cuboniks, p. 17.

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