Utopia, or What is Left of the Future?

Introduction

Utopia is responsible for some of the greatest crimes and tragedies of the modern age. Wherever utopian schemes have been put into practice, they have failed catastrophically. In attempting to remake the world and the people within it, utopia showed itself to be blind to reality and to human nature. In neglecting the imperfections of both human beings and the institutions they create, utopians turned away from the demands of real politics and escaped into otherworldly fantasies. To any honest observer, the lesson of the twentieth century is clear: utopia must be written off as a failure and put squarely behind us. The major modern utopian projects may have been inspirational for many in the past and they may even retain a certain nostalgic appeal for some of us today. Nevertheless, history has shown us that utopia is not only practically unachievable but extremely dangerous. Utopia is hopelessly out of step with the world as it is, and is therefore best regarded as a kind of daydreaming – something never to be realised outside the minds of those who dream.

Such, in any case, was the view of utopia prevailing throughout much of the world in the final decades of the twentieth century. The demise of utopia and the need to reconcile ourselves to our non-utopian prospects became, during this period, part of the reigning common sense of global capitalism. In one respect, this anti-utopianism echoed, however unknowingly, an insight found in the work of one of the century's most influential thinkers: Sigmund Freud. According to Freud, utopia is necessarily a chimera on account of the inherently conflictual nature of human life. In the words of the sociologist and critic Philip Rieff, for Freud, 'we are frustrated because we are, first of all, unhappy combinations of conflicting desires.'[1] For Freud, then, utopia is an impossibility insofar as it would appear to require the elimination of the psychic and social conflicts to which incompatible human desires inevitably give rise. The failed attempts at utopia in the twentieth century seemed to offer confirmation of this view.

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[1] Philip Rieff, *Freud: The Mind of the Moralist*, 3rd edn. (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1979), 343.

In the early twenty-first century, however, and especially during the years from 2008 onward, there has been a striking resurgence of utopianism in cultural discourse, from independent media and academia to literature, cinema, and the art world. At the same time, utopianism has also made inroads into the political domain, with utopian demands for worldwide system change informing the work of activists and political parties in many countries. As an important element in a wide variety of projects, both individual and collective, utopianism has recently come to occupy a prominent role in the social imaginary once again. Why this should be the case and why, in particular, it should be the case *now* is a question that is very much worth asking. Answering it will require us to revisit the history of utopia in order to understand how its period of eclipse came about. We will then be in a better position to appreciate why our dystopian present is showing signs of eliciting a utopian response in some quarters.

1. The Rise of Utopia: 1516–1917

The term 'utopia' was coined and first used in print by the English Renaissance statesman, writer, and humanist scholar Thomas More in his philosophical dialogue, *Utopia*, originally published in Latin in 1516 and subtitled 'On the Best State of a Republic and on the New Island of Utopia.' More's coinage is a multilingual pun drawing on ancient Greek etymology and meaning both 'no place' (*ou*-topos) and 'good place' (*eu*-topos) – an ambiguity richly elaborated throughout More's layered and elusive text. *Utopia* is ostensibly a description of an ideal society in which a simple form of communism is practiced, universal healthcare is freely available, and divorce, euthanasia, and a degree of freedom in religion are permitted. It may also be read as a partial critique of that same society, which places severe restrictions on personal freedom, enforces harsh penalties for even minor misdemeanours, and relies heavily on slave labour. While citizens of Utopia have all their basic needs met by the state and benefit from short working hours and increased leisure time compared with More's contemporaries, they are at the same time subject to a high level of supervision and monitoring, requiring permission to travel from one district to another, for instance, and facing a lifetime of enslavement if they fail to do so on two consecutive occasions. A radical departure from the world of early modern England in certain regards, *Utopia* has also been read as a warning and as looking forward to later historical developments. As two

commentators on More's work have put it, 'if Utopia anticipates the welfare democracies of our own time in many respects, the elaborate constraints imposed on its inhabitants also frequently put us in mind of modern totalitarian regimes.'[2]

More's intentions in writing *Utopia*, and the uncertain role played by irony in the text, have been the subject of extensive scholarly debate, with no definitive conclusions reached as to its true purpose. Whether his book was intended as a satire and, if so, what it is supposed to be satirising, whether it was meant as a serious intervention in the politics of its day, or whether it was simply a diverting flight of the imagination will probably never be known. Whatever More's objective, the influence of his work on modern literature and culture has been pervasive, exceeding anything he could have anticipated. From Francis Bacon's early scientific utopia *New Atlantis* (1626) to B. F. Skinner's behaviourist thought experiment *Walden Two* (1948), and from lunar voyage stories like Francis Godwin's *The Man in the Moone* (1638) to science fiction novels like Ursula Le Guin's *The Dispossessed* (1974), many prominent writers have since found More's *Utopia* an inescapable reference point for imagining alternate societies and thinking about how life might be conducted differently. Even where elements of More's own version of utopia are subverted or overturned – as in the case of some anarchist, feminist, and Afrofuturist utopias, for example – his basic conception of a genre in which unrealised social, political, and economic possibilities are explored has remained a crucial resource for modern literature and social thought.

Utopia is by no means an exclusively literary affair, however. One of the most striking aspects of utopia as a cultural phenomenon is that it encompasses both a rich literary tradition and a variety of real-world political projects. Utopia has not, in other words, been confined to the work of imaginative writers, but has played a role in shaping the thoughts and deeds of political actors, sometimes on a huge scale. The nineteenth century is associated with an explosion of utopian literature, much of it broadly socialist in orientation. Prominent examples of this trend include Mary Griffith's *Three Hundred Years Hence* (1836), Edward Carpenter's *Towards Democracy* (1883), Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward* (1888), William Morris's *News from Nowhere* (1890), and Oscar Wilde's *The Soul of Man Under*

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[2] George M. Logan and Robert M. Adams, eds., introduction to Thomas More, *Utopia* [1516] (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), xii.

Socialism (1891), among others. While there are important differences in form and content between these texts, each of them anticipates a post-capitalist society where economic as well as political equality has been achieved, even if the means of attaining this are understood in diverse and sometimes opposing ways. Nevertheless, despite the importance of this period in the history of utopia, it would be a mistake to think either that utopia had leapt over the centuries separating More from Morris, or that utopia had persisted in a principally literary guise during that time. In the intervening period, utopia had entered the realm of politics, where it was to have a decisive impact on the course of events.

Seventeenth-century England saw multiple successive utopian political movements advocating for radical change at a national level, including the Levellers and the Fifth Monarchy Men. Of these movements, it was the religious reformer Gerrard Winstanley's Diggers which, as John Storey has argued, represented the most overtly utopian alternative to the status quo.[3] Initially arising in response to the privatisation of land as a result of a series of enclosures, the Diggers' project quickly developed into a much more ambitious initiative seeking to replace England's late feudal, early capitalist settlement with a radically egalitarian, proto-anarchist network of self-sustaining rural communities. Like Wat Tyler and John Ball, key figures in the Peasant's Revolt of 1381, Winstanley's politics were rooted in a reading of the Bible that emphasised its implications for social justice. His political pamphlet, *The New Law of Righteousness* (1649), which set out the aims of the Diggers and made an impassioned case for the abolition of social hierarchies and land ownership, took as its point of departure a passage from the New Testament's Book of Acts: 'And all that believed were together, and had all things common; And sold their possessions and goods, and parted them to all men, as every man had need.'[4] On this basis, Winstanley was able to make what he saw as the orthodox Christian case that, since all people are equal in the eyes of their creator, both aristocracy and property in land must be ruled illegitimate on Biblical grounds. These principles were put into practice in a number of Digger colonies on previously vacant areas of land in Surrey, Kent, and Northamptonshire, where food was distributed freely to any who came to join the communities and contribute their labour. Each of these colonies was then overthrown after local landowners hired armed men to drive the communities from the land.

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[3] John Storey, *Radical Utopianism and Cultural Studies* (New York and London: Routledge, 2019), 42–57.
[4] King James Bible, Acts 2:44–45.

Undeterred, Winstanley's second pamphlet, *The Law of Freedom in a Platform* (1652), went further, arguing that an authentic Christian society could only be established on the basis of the wholesale abolition of social rank, property relations, and the wage labour system. Although no further attempt was made to realise this vision during the remainder of Winstanley's lifetime, his conviction that society should be organised on the basis of full political and economic equality was to serve as a common reference point and source of inspiration for many later utopians.

One of the most decisive turning points in the history of utopia was to come a little over a century later. Scholars of utopia are generally agreed that the French Revolution (1789–99) represents the moment at which utopia entered the political mainstream. Prior to the events in France, utopia had been articulated via literary and philosophical works, political pamphlets, and various defeated uprisings by marginalised social groups, especially rural labourers. The concept of utopia was present in the public imagination of Europe during this time, but it was not a dominant idea in political life. The French Revolution was to change all of this by demonstrating that society could be transformed at a deep level, not just in the realm of fantasy or wish fulfilment, but in reality. This transformation was to have far-reaching consequences for how social and political change was understood right down to the twentieth century. In the words of the philosopher Richard Rorty,

> The French Revolution [showed] that the whole vocabulary of social relations, and the whole spectrum of social institutions, could be replaced almost overnight. This precedent made utopian politics the rule rather than the exception among intellectuals. Utopian politics sets aside questions about both the will of God and the nature of man and dreams of creating a hitherto unknown form of society.[5]

The lesson drawn by many observers of 1789 was that society is the contingent product of collective human agency, rather than the necessary result of either an immutable human nature or an unquestionable divine decree. What the demise of the *Ancien Régime* was taken to have shown was

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[5] Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 3.

that, far from being essential, unalterable features of any viable way of life, the institutions, laws, and social structures that had been taken for granted in France – and, by extension, throughout much of Europe – were in fact the outcome of a series of human decisions. These decisions could have been different – and therefore so could society.

The following century provides many examples of the kind of intellectuals alluded to by Rorty: those for whom the French Revolution and its aftermath represented the birth pangs of a new age, and for whom utopianism was now the norm in politics. As well as utopian socialists like Edward Bellamy and William Morris, there were also communists like Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, and anarchists such as Peter Kropotkin and Mikhail Bakunin. In different ways and from very different perspectives, all of these writers envisaged the end of capitalism and a transition to some form of classless society, one organised around the values of cooperation, as in the case of Kropotkin's ideal of 'mutual aid', or solidarity, as in the case of Marx's principle 'from each according to his ability to each according to his need.' While the nineteenth century also witnessed a number of significant revolutionary events, including the liberal and democratic upheavals of 1848 and the Paris Commune of 1871, it was not until the early twentieth century that an explicitly utopian project on a comparable scale to that of the revolution in France was launched.

2. Utopia in the Twentieth Century: 1917–1989

Vladimir Lenin, one of the principle architects of the Russian Revolution of 1917, was deeply versed in the works of Marx, elaborating on Marx's ideas in his own theoretical writings, and aiming to realise communism as anticipated by Marx in his own native Russia. Lenin was also an admirer of Winstanley's Diggers, his own hostility to religion notwithstanding, and likewise shared the nineteenth-century utopian socialists' belief that there were still lessons to be learnt from the experience of the French Revolution, though he agreed with Marx that it had been deeply flawed and had ultimately served the interests of the bourgeois class. Lenin was also the co-founder of the Bolshevik Party along with his early collaborator and later political opponent Alexander Bogdanov, a remarkable Russian polymath

who, as well as developing an early version of information systems theory, was the author of the novel *Red Star* (1908), the first Bolshevik utopia and a celebrated work of Russian science fiction.[6]

In the tradition of the seventeenth-century man in the moon story, *Red Star* relates how a member of the Bolshevik Party is brought by Martians to their home planet, where he encounters a society in which the major social problems identified by Marx – alienation, exploitation, and class divisions – have been solved. The Martians are enlightened communists whose civilisation is defined by egalitarianism, freedom of occupation, and the priority of leisure. As well as being non-monogamous, the Martians lack the concept of gender, and so do not view work, social roles, relationships, or clothing through the lens of the gender binary familiar to the story's protagonist. While there is a fantastical quality to much of Bogdanov's novel, there is little doubt that the Martian civilisation represents an approximation of its author's own vision of an achieved utopia. Despite being a work of science fiction set on another planet, *Red Star* may therefore be read as an expression of the utopian hopes that inspired the early Bolshevik movement.

Within just a few years of the Revolution, however, this image of utopia was seeming ever further out of reach and was beginning to be replaced in the minds of some Russian writers by more dystopian speculations. Lenin was the head of state during this period, acting as head of the government of Soviet Russia from 1917–24. As a follower of Marx, Lenin shared Marx's dream of a united, post-capitalist world where the means of production would be collectively owned and the state would have, as Marx put it in an influential formulation, 'withered away.' On the way to true communism, however, Lenin foresaw that a transitional phase of state power would be needed in order to fend off resistance from rival factions and opponents of the revolution. Borrowing a phrase used by Marx in a letter of 1852, Lenin argued for the necessity of a 'dictatorship of the proletariat,' whereby the power of the state could be brought to bear on enemies of the new regime. During Lenin's subsequent premiership, this power – in the form of prison camps, state terror, and mass executions – was used to discipline and punish citizens perceived as disloyal. The new Soviet state was built around a centralised, planned economy, with production and distribution controlled directly by government. Bogdanov's attitude to

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[6] Alexander Bogdanov, *Red Star*, trans. Charles Rougle (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1984).

1917 and its consequences, meanwhile, was ambivalent. On the one hand, he continued to believe that the overthrow of autocracy must count as an emancipatory step for any people, maintaining his defence of both the revolution of 1917 and the defeated earlier revolution of 1905, and remaining an adherent of Marxism. He was nevertheless dismayed and appalled at the events following 1917 and was strongly opposed to Lenin's methods once the latter was firmly established in power. To the end of his life, Bogdanov continued to believe that the goal proposed by Marx – the creation of a new kind of democratic society that would exist solely for the sake of the free realisation of human powers and capacities – was the logical end point of modern social development, while at the same time detesting the means by which Lenin had set out to achieve it.[7] Bogdanov remained a critic of Leninism and of the new regime until his death in 1928.

Throughout the revolutionary years, Bogdanov had observed a leadership cult growing around Lenin and the erosion of democracy within the Bolshevik Party. The rise of Joseph Stalin confirmed everything he had feared. Stalin took power after Lenin's death in 1924 and initiated a period of unprecedented repression. The immense failure of Stalin's collectivisation of industry and agriculture, and the new form of authoritarianism that accompanied it, were to prove definitive of the Soviet era. The ensuing Great Famine resulted in the starvation of at least 3.5 million peasants, possibly many more, while the Great Purge, during which all political opposition to Stalin (both real and imagined) was crushed, is estimated to have seen more than half a million citizens executed and millions more exiled. This was also the period of the construction of the Gulags: a vast system of forced labour camps which incarcerated almost twenty million people over the next three decades. Even before the Stalinist period, however, it was clear to some Russian observers that the country that was emerging in the aftermath of the revolution was a betrayal of its former utopian hopes. This view was perhaps best articulated by Yevgeny Zamyatin, another Bolshevik Party member and a prominent Russian writer during the 1910s and 20s.

Completed in 1921, Zamyatin's novel *We* was likely the first text to be banned by the Soviet Censorship Board, later leading to the blacklisting of its author. A version of the novel nevertheless

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[7] See Richard Stites, 'Fantasy and Revolution: Alexander Bogdanov and the Origins of Bolshevik Science Fiction' in Bogdanov, *Red Star*, 1–16.

began to circulate outside Russia, with an English translation appearing in the Unites States in 1924. Although abridged and containing many errors, the book was a profound influence on the two most widely read and best-known dystopian novels of the century: Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932) and George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949), both of which bear the imprint of *We* at many points.[8] Like the societies later imagined by Huxley and Orwell, the society depicted in *We* is characterised by total social control and the absence of free thought. *We* extrapolates from Zamyatin's observations of post-revolutionary Russia in order to imagine a world in which a successor regime to the Soviet Union has conquered the planet and maintained its dominance into the distant future. In the world of OneState, each hour of the day and all activities are rigidly scheduled and accounted for, with even sexual intercourse taking place at an appointed time. Citizens wear standard issue uniforms and are assigned numbers instead of names. Power is centralised in the figure of the ominous Benefactor, while the only written expression permitted outside of scientific research is in the service of state propaganda. The ethos of OneState is summarised as follows by the novel's protagonist, D-503:

> Yes: to integrate completely the colossal equation of the universe. Yes: to unbend the wild curve, to straighten it tangentially, asymptotically, to flatten it to an undeviating line. Because the line of OneState is a straight line. The great, divine, precise, wise straight line – the wisest of all lines.[9]

Written in a hyperbolic style, *We* is a scathing satire that borrows tropes from the work of H. G. Wells and other science fiction authors in order to comment on the experience of Zamyatin's contemporaries and to offer a warning about Russia's future. As a portrait of a society purged of difference, desire, creativity, and contradiction, *We* charts the distance travelled since Bogdanov's pre-revolutionary *Red Star*. The revolutionaries had dreamt of Mars; what they got was OneState.

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[8] Aldous Huxley, *Brave New World* [1932] (London: Vintage, 2007); George Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* [1949] (London: Penguin, 2000).
[9] Yevgeny Zamyatin, *We*, trans. Clarence Brown (London: Penguin, 1993), p. 4.

3. Utopia and the End of History: 1989–2008

Between the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, a large body of commentary, both scholarly and journalistic, was written in response to the failure of the Soviet experiment. There is a clear continuity to much of this commentary, irrespective of the political affiliation of its author. Very often the same lessons were drawn from the events of 1989 – lessons which were to inform political common sense throughout the following decades. That year, the political scientist Francis Fukuyama formulated the first of these lessons in a particularly dramatic and influential way:

> What we may be witnessing is not just the end of the Cold War, or the passing of a particular period of post-war history, but the end of history as such: that is, the end point of mankind's ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government.[10]

By 'the end of history', Fukuyama did not mean that there would be no more historical events, but rather that the end of history understood as a competition between rival political ideologies may be at hand. From Fukuyama's perspective, the Cold War had shown that there remained just two, mutually exclusive political and economic options in the modern world: centralised state communism on the Soviet model, or liberal democracy underpinned by capitalism and the free market. The spectacular failure of the first meant that the second ought now to be declared the winner. Whatever its faults, some combination of liberalism and capitalism was now the only serious contender for political legitimacy.

The second lesson drawn from 1989 had to do with utopia. For many commentators, including those who had been critics of the Soviet Union during the preceding decades, the inability of the Soviet system to deliver on the revolutionary promise of 1917 meant that utopia had been 'refuted' by the course of events. As the sociologist Ruth Levitas has observed:

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[10] Francis Fukuyama, 'The End of History', *The National Interest*, 16 (1989), p. 4.

Television and press commentary on the collapse of communist regimes referred repeatedly to the collapse of utopia, with utopia itself equated with Marxism, communism, and totalitarianism. Politically, both Marxism and utopia were regarded as 'over,' and wider political and intellectual discourses followed the same trend.[11]

The thought behind this equating of the failed Soviet regime with utopia – and hence the discrediting of utopianism as such – was that if the Soviet Union had been the most ambitious attempt ever undertaken to realise utopian ideals, then what its failure signified was that utopia had been *empirically* refuted, that is, not just defeated argumentatively but shown to be unviable in practice. Assuming that the initial identification of the Soviet Union with utopia is well-founded, this is a forceful criticism as it appears to place the weight of history on the side of the critics of utopia: if the Soviet project had decisively failed (along with its equivalents in China and Cambodia), it was reasoned, then the same verdict must be passed on utopia. The one was seen to stand or fall with the other.

This, then, was the multi-pronged attack that appeared to have vanquished utopia during the 1990s and early 2000s. Liberal capitalism had emerged victorious at the end of the Cold War, history was over, and the collapse of the Soviet Union had proven utopia to be an impossible dream. Aside from piecemeal revisions to liberalism and capitalism to be made on an ad-hoc basis, no further major ideological struggles lay ahead. Any change that could realistically be envisioned lay within the parameters of liberal capitalism, which during these decades was further entrenching its international hegemony via globalisation and financialisation. In such a context, the idea of utopia seemed like a quaint reminder of an earlier and in some ways more innocent age: a time when there were still political 'ideas' to argue about, and where there could therefore be substantial disagreement about social and political ends. From its origin in More's ambiguous text of 1516 to its seemingly unambiguous demise in 1989, utopia had served as a repository for the collective hopes and desires of those dissatisfied with the world as they found it. In the final decade of the twentieth century and the early years of the twenty-

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[11] Ruth Levitas, *The Concept of Utopia*, 2nd edn. (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2011), p. x.

first, the utopian tradition was widely agreed to be exhausted. The almost five-hundred-year adventure of utopia was over.

4. Utopia in the Twenty-First Century: 2008–2020

A first good reason to doubt that the story of utopia is at an end is the path taken by world events since the global financial crisis of 2008. Contrary to Fukuyama's confident prediction that liberal capitalism would be the world's final political and economic settlement, the early decades of the twenty-first century have multiplied political possibilities and highlighted a range of potential competitors. Xi Jinping's authoritarian capitalism, Donald Trump's illiberal capitalism, and the resurgence of fascist and quasi-fascist regimes in Europe remind us that the link between capitalism and liberalism is contingent; it is possible to retain the former while dispensing with the latter. The emergence of left-wing populist movements in response to post-2008 bank bailouts and economic austerity measures also runs counter to Fukuyama's end of history narrative. Jeremy Corbyn's Labour Party in Britain, Alexis Tsipras's Syriza in Greece, and Pablo Iglesias Turrión's Podemos in Spain all commanded a broad support base, especially among younger voters, through their combination of populist tactics, a commitment to renewing democracy, and economic policies significantly to the left of the established consensus in their respective countries. Although he was unsuccessful in seeking the Democratic Party nomination in 2016 and 2020, the fact that Bernie Sanders, a social democrat and self-described 'socialist', came close to being a contender for the US presidency likewise indicates that the political field has opened up considerably since Fukuyama's prophecy of 1989.

Beyond the form of the traditional political party, the post-2008 period has also seen an efflorescence of radical protest movements on a scale not seen since the US civil rights movement and the utopian countercultures of the 1960s and 70s. In response to economic austerity and the sense that governments were acting to 'socialise the losses, privatise the gains' of financial speculation, the grassroots anti-capitalist Occupy movement was born in the peaceful occupation of Zuccotti Park in New York's Wall Street financial district in September 2011. The now familiar slogan, 'We are the 99%,' intended to highlight the disparities between a hyper-wealthy elite and an increasingly

impoverished and insecure majority, can be traced to this moment. While the phrase itself is generally attributed to the anarchist anthropologist David Graeber, who gave a series of popular public lectures on capitalism and debt to participants at Zuccotti, the 1% had already that year been the subject of a widely shared article by the Nobel Prize-winning economist Joseph Stiglitz, in which he observed that the 1% of the US population who control 40% of the wealth no longer understand that 'their fate is bound up with how the other 99% live. Throughout history, this is something that the top 1% eventually do learn. Too late.'[12] After the protestors were forced from the park in November, Occupy morphed into a global movement with marches and demonstrations under its name in more than thirty countries.

Black Lives Matter (BLM), a social justice movement opposing racist violence and white supremacy, was founded in 2013 in response to the murder of the African American teenager Trayvon Martin. As well as achieving worldwide visibility through its efficacious deployment of nonviolent civil disobedience tactics to draw attention to the unlawful killing of dozens of African Americans at the hands of police, BLM also formed alliances with movements for indigenous and LGBTQ rights, and inspired protests and related movements in Australia, Canada, Denmark, France, Germany, Japan, New Zealand, and the UK. In 2020, the death of George Floyd, a 46-year-old African American man who died after a police officer knelt on his neck for almost eight minutes, led to BLM protests in over 2,000 US towns and cities, with an estimated 10,000 separate demonstrations over the course of the following four months. Although it is hard to accurately gauge the number of participants, official estimates place the number involved at between 15 and 26 million – by far the largest protest in the nation's history.

Three years earlier, on 21st January 2017, the day after President Donald Trump's inauguration, the Women's March on Washington saw between 3 and 5 million citizens take a stand against the new president in favour of women's rights, human rights, and justice for racial and sexual minorities – a protest second in magnitude only to the unrest following the death of George Floyd. Also beginning in 2017, with accusations of sexual misconduct against the film producer Harvey Weinstein, the Me Too movement drew attention to the ubiquitous sexual harassment of women and the ongoing need for feminist activism. Related campaigns over the following two years saw further sizeable demonstrations

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[12] Joseph Stiglitz, 'Of the 1%, by the 1%, for the 1%', *Vanity Fair* (May 2011) https://www.vanityfair.com/news/2011/05/top-one-percent-201105

against the Trump administration, including numerous 'Handmaid' protests, in which protestors dressed in red cloaks and white bonnets in the style of women forced into sexual slavery in Margaret Atwood's dystopian novel *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) took to the streets to oppose restrictions on reproductive rights and entrenched misogyny in US society, sometimes marching under the slogan 'Make Margaret Atwood fiction again.'[13]

Another notable twenty-first-century movement for radical social change is Extinction Rebellion (XR), established in the UK in 2018. Like BLM, XR has used nonviolent civil disobedience to raise public awareness about issues neglected by mainstream political parties, primarily around species extinction, global heating, and the prospect of an impending ecological catastrophe. While the movement has received some criticism from other activists, in particular for its lack of diversity and its centring of middle-class voices, XR's disruption of public transport networks and its rhetorically forceful demands for action on the climate crisis have arguably helped to sustain a public conversation about the need for immediate action on an adequate scale. The interventions of the Swedish teenage activist Greta Thunberg have also served to raise awareness of the urgency of the reality of global heating, especially among children and young people, who have followed Thunberg's lead in proving themselves to be highly effective environmental activists.

5. Utopianism after Utopia

In combination, the social pathologies and economic injustices that are the targets of these diverse activist groups point to a political situation very far from the steady equilibrium anticipated by those for whom the demise of the Soviet Union had confirmed the incontestable status of capitalism. Whereas Fukuyama and those who shared his outlook on the post-1989 settlement had held that small-scale alterations to existing structures would be all that was needed for the foreseeable future, the re-emergence of radical critique since 2008 suggests that a much deeper kind of change is today being called for by an increasing number of constituencies. Here it is important to recognise the far-reaching implications of the demands being made by movements like Occupy, BLM, XR, and the European left

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[13] Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* [1985] (London: Vintage, 2017).

populists, among others. While these examples obviously do not exhaust the field of radical critique in contemporary culture, they are illustrative of some of the vitally felt human needs which cannot be fulfilled under present conditions. Taken together, they represent a collective demand for a fundamentally different way of living together: one organised around principles of equality, solidarity, and ecological responsibly. This would be a way of life free from unsustainable and unjustifiable economic inequality, systemic racism and discrimination, patriarchal hierarchies and ingrained misogyny, and harmful extractivism and dependence on fossil fuels. Nowhere in the modern world has anything like this been sustained on a large scale, and nothing guarantees that it will come to pass or prove successful. How it might be constructed and how it would be maintained are open questions.

The psychoanalyst and philosopher Slavoj Žižek has drawn an important distinction between what he terms 'utopia as simple imaginary impossibility' and utopia 'in the more radical sense of enacting what, *within the framework of the existing social relations*, appears as "impossible"…'[14] It is the latter mode which calls for further exploration today. Unlike the utopians of the past, we no longer have faith in underlying historical laws or inevitable historical progress. As post-Freudians, our utopianism likewise cannot avoid and must incorporate the insight that compromises must be struck between competing desires, and that some degree of rivalry between ideals is inescapable. The experience of the twentieth century has also chastened us and warned us against any form of radical change that does not prioritise democracy and place democratic decision making at the centre of any new structures it establishes. For all these reasons, one traditional conception of utopia – utopia as a fixed blueprint to be imposed from above – is over, and its passing should not be regretted. Utopianism as the dream of an unrealised world, however, a world that can often seem impossible from the perspective of our dystopian present, is worth holding onto. To dispense with it would be to impoverish ourselves both imaginatively and ethically. The changes that are now needed if worsening inequality and disastrous global heating are to be avoided require an intellectual and practical reorientation of a sort that had been unthinkable until very recently. Envisioning such change and the means to realise it is the province of utopianism.

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[14] Slavoj Žižek, *In Defence of Lost Causes* (London: Verso, 2008), 310.

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