

Why Should Universities Contribute to New Utopias?

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Abstract

What would the ideal society look like, and its university? In 1516 the English humanist Thomas More tried his hand at imagining a perfect society on a distant island. His *Utopia* was first published in the Flemish town of Leuven, home of a university that was established almost a century earlier in 1425. Five hundred years later, university scholars revisit More's exercise in an interdisciplinary range of science-based utopias.¹ Like More's *Utopia*, later and new utopias have to be read in the light of their own times. Utopias are connected to and embedded in their social realities. They belong to their own realities and evolve with these realities. Just as utopias need their matching realities, realities also need their matching utopias. At first sight there may seem to be an inescapable tension between scientific research and the description of an *ou-topos*, a non-existent place.

¹ See Veerle Achten et al., eds. *A Truly Golden Handbook: The Scholarly Quest for Utopia*. Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2016.

Clearly, utopias can neither change nor replace the laws of nature. Yet utopias and science can and should be related, and universities should contribute to developing new utopias.

Keywords *Utopia, university, Thomas More, governance, SDGs (Sustainable Development Goals)*

Introduction

More's *Utopia*, a sharp analysis of shifting powers and tensions in society and a description of another (possible?) reality, can only be understood within its historical context. At the beginning of the sixteenth century the need for a visionary dream of society was clearly felt. At that time intellectuals throughout Europe were analyzing, commenting on, and in some cases actively influencing the changing political, religious, and socio-economic realities. Think of Erasmus's *In Praise of Folly* (1509, written on his friend More's estate in Bucklersbury, London), Machiavelli's *Il Principe* (1513), and Luther's *Ninety-Five Theses on the Power and Efficacy of Indulgences* (1517). Leuven and its university were at the center of these debates. Pope Hadrian VI (1522-1523) for instance was professor at the university in Leuven, and his friend Erasmus spent many years in Leuven. Erasmus was also instrumental in the Leuven foundation of the Collegium Trilingue (1517) by Hieronymus van Busleyden, friend of More and recipient of one of the fictitious letters opening the *Utopia*. The printer and publisher Dirk Martens, who published

More's *Utopia*, was the first printer in the Low Countries to print Greek.

Utopia is a necessary technique to wake up from reality.² This contribution shows utopia's capacity to wake up for universities, and especially for social sciences, from reality, with a special focus on good governance, especially since "it is axiomatic to state that any and all political systems, from the most liberally governed commune to the most repressive totalitarian regime, need to be administered and managed."³ One could add that even utopias need to be administered and governed. Since Public Administration, as the academic field of the study of public administrations, i.e. public sector organizations and their policies, always includes an ambition to improve realities, there is an implicit utopian ambition in the theories and practices of governing and administering the public sphere.

In John Carey's overview of utopias in *The Faber Book of Utopias*, 101 historical versions of utopia are selected.⁴ According to Stephen Toulmin, the challenge, or rather, the assignment, is "facing the future again."⁵ There are two attitudes to the future, namely imagination or nostalgia, and "the task of defining realistic 'futuribles' is open only to those who are ready to adopt imaginative attitudes."⁶

² Miguel Abensour, "L'utopie, une nécessaire technique du réveil," *Le Monde-La Vie, Hors Série* (Octobre 2012), 8.

³ Louis C. Gawthrop, *Public Service and Democracy: Ethical Imperatives for the 21st Century* (New York: Chatham House Publishers, 1998), 124.

⁴ J. Carey, ed., *The Faber Book of Utopias* (London: Faber and Faber, 1999).

⁵ Stephen Toulmin, *Cosmopolis: The Hidden Agenda of Modernity* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992), 203.

⁶ *Ibid.*

We first look at how realities influence utopias. In the second part a (limited) historical view on public governance in More's *Utopia* is sketched. A third section discusses the utopian dimension of current governance policies. Finally, we discuss how utopias may influence future realities and how universities should play a role in this.

1. From Old and New Realities to Old and New Utopias

Utopias are connected to their realities. Specifically, they are embedded in these realities and thus belong to them. Since realities evolve, utopias evolve as well. Old utopias belong to old realities. Therefore, new realities require new utopias.

When revolutions are driven by utopias, they result in excesses, which may deny the premises of these utopias. The Arab Spring also had a utopian ambition: "Democracy is a dream that can be fulfilled around the globe Tunisia's new constitution is a source of immense pride for all Tunisians."⁷ This illustrates that there is an interaction between realities and utopias. Utopias challenge realities since they allow for a shared analysis as well as shared imagined ideals. Ultimately, they allow for a voluntarist appeal to contribute to change or even revolution.

This approach has been referred to as the historicity of utopias.⁸ A specific reality triggers a specific utopia. More's *Utopia* corresponds to his historical context. This is also the reason why

⁷ Rachid Ghannouchi, "The Tunisian Experience," *The Cairo Review of Global Affairs*, 13 (2014): 97, 99.

⁸ Quentin Deluermoz, "Les utopies d'Elias. La longue durée et le possible," Introduction to *L'utopie* by Norbert Elias (Paris: La Découverte, 2009).

next to the social and political utopias, from the nineteenth century on, technological utopias have surfaced, matching the reality of a technological and industrial revolution. This makes utopias not just illusions but real locations for the revelation and observation of these realities.

On the other hand, especially since the twentieth century, the dark utopias, i.e. the dystopias, have taken over the utopias. There has been a reverse from dream to nightmare, and from utopia to dystopia.⁹ The interaction of realities with their matching utopias/dystopias could be upward- or downward-going spirals.

2. Public Governance in Utopia

If one is looking for how public governance looks like in utopia, then three dimensions could be expected to emerge: a) the relation of politics and citizens, or the leadership and structures of utopia and its society; b) the organization of a utopian society with its human beings and its public and private sphere; and c) the content of public policies on major issues such as property, health, education, security, and information.

Of course one could also expect that most of the issues that require public interventions are solved in a utopian system. The needs are defined and under control, technology has resolved many practical problems, and people behave differently and take the general interest into account. Public policies therefore have no object, since managerial and governance issues are typical for real societies and not for utopian ones. Historically, however,

⁹ Norbert Elias, "A quoi servent les utopies scientifiques et littéraires pour l'avenir?" in *L'utopie*, ed. Norbert Elias (Paris: La Découverte, 2009), 116.

Marx and Engels, who were advocates of “scientific socialism,” rejected “utopian socialism” as developed by Saint-Simon, Fourier, and Owen, with its high levels of decentralization and even with stateless societies. Nevertheless, most utopias do have substance on the three aforementioned clusters of concern.

In More’s *Utopia*, from 1516, schools, hospitals, and libraries take care of the poor and the weak.¹⁰ This implies big state control. There is contracting out of warfare. Society is a kind of abbey. There is no private property. There is also a very developed ethics of working and studying, like the *ora et labora* from the monasteries. Also, there is no freedom of expression or opinion, of religion, of travel, and of choice of profession. “There are fifty-four splendid big towns on the island, all with the same language, laws, customs, and institutions. They’re all built on the same plan.”¹¹ The hierarchical structure of the governance is based on representation and (secret) elections from local governments:

The population is divided into groups of thirty households, each of which elects an official called a Styward every year. Styward is the old Utopian title—the modern one is District Controller. For every ten Stywards and the households they represent there is a Bencheater, or Senior District Controller. Each town has two hundred Stywards, who are responsible for electing the Mayor. They do

¹⁰ Thomas More, *Utopia* (London: Penguin Classics, 1980). See also Norbert Elias, “La critique de l’Etat chez Thomas More,” and “Thomas More et l’utopie,” in *L’utopie* (Paris: La Découverte, 2009)

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 70.

so by secret ballot The Mayor remains in office for life, unless he is suspected of wanting to establish a dictatorship.¹²

All fifty-four cities elect three persons to the Aircastle, the parliament in the capital. There are not many laws and therefore all are expert. More, who was not only Speaker of the House of Commons in 1523, but also Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster (1525-1529), and Lord Chancellor (1529-1532), had a very good view on his surrounding social, economic, and political reality. Writing his *Utopia* was to trigger a wake-up call from that reality.¹³

Just as sleep may induce a dream or a nightmare, the exercise of creating the non-existing future may result in a utopia or a dystopia. In Bellamy's utopia in *Looking Backward*, Julian West falls into a deep hypnosis-induced sleep in 1887 and awakes in 2000 in Boston, Massachusetts: "We have no wars now, and our governments no war powers, but in order to protect every citizen against hunger, cold and nakedness, and provide for all his physical and mental needs, the function is assumed of directing his industry for a term of years. . . . We have no parties or politicians, and as for demagoguery, and corruption, they are words having only an historical significance."¹⁴

Government distributes everything: "A system of direct distribution from the national storehouses took the place of trade, and for this money was unnecessary."¹⁵ In the structure of power is

¹² Ibid., 74.

¹³ See Hilary Mantel, *Bring up the Bodies* (London: Fourth Estate, 2013).

¹⁴ See Edward Bellamy, *Looking Backward* (London: William Reeves, n.d.), 46-47.

¹⁵ Ibid., 65.

an industrial army, with a general-in-chief who is the President of the United States, and with Lieutenant-generals, Generals, etc.¹⁶ There are no prisons but hospitals, no lawyers, and almost no legal cases. The only administration is the organization of the industry. There are municipalities, which have important and extensive functions “in looking out for the public comfort and recreation, and the improvement and embellishment of the villages and cities. . . . Every town or city is conceded the right to retain, for its own public works, a certain proportion of the quota of labour its citizens contribute to the nation.”¹⁷

However, there are also dystopias as described by Orwell, Huxley, Butler, etc. In Samuel Butler’s *Erewhon* (the inverse of “nowhere”), machines are not allowed, and there are Schools of the “Unreason.”¹⁸ In most cases the dystopian nightmare is about “mass utopia” with dictatorships and loss of personal freedoms, in East and West.¹⁹

3. Utopia in Public Governance

The broad scientific field of administrative sciences, public administration, public policy, and public management, gets inputs from a variety of scientific disciplines. Historically, the most crucial ones are law, political science, sociology, and management. More recent disciplines include psychology, ICT-technology, anthropology, and history. The preponderance of

¹⁶ Ibid., 141.

¹⁷ Ibid., 157.

¹⁸ See Samuel Butler, *Erewhon* (London: Penguin Classics, 1985).

¹⁹ See Susan Buck-Morss, *Dreamworld and Catastrophe: The Passing of Mass Utopia in East and West* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2002).

disciplines in the field of public administration is a cultural issue, but also consists of a cyclical scientific agenda. Currently, public and administrative law (in competition with private law) is very present, even if the managerial private sector currency is strong.

The link with utopia is the implicit normative dimension of having “a vision of the Common Good”²⁰ and an ideal vision on administering and governing the public realm.

The purpose of studying and researching the scientific field of Public Administration (capitals) is to improve its research object of public administration which is the public sector and its activities and policies. Public Administration is not just scientifically studying “governance”; it is trying to improve “good governance.” As a consequence, there is a normative side to the study of Public Administration. The most extreme expansion of this normative side turns into a utopia.

Utopian dimensions in theories, models and concepts: Shifting to or away from Utopia? At the beginning of the twentieth century, the scientific approach of administration and management, almost an engineering approach (Fayol, Taylor, Gilbreth, Gantt), had a very mechanistic view of improvement and had an ideal of the man-machine model of interaction. These administrations as utopian machine models in scientific Public Administration (classical mechanistic) evolved into models (Herbert Simon) that included limited rationality where not all actors had all the information, where the purpose was not to aim for a maximum but for an acceptable optimum, and where there was an acceptance that the ideal solution was not possible.

²⁰ Gawthrop, 102.

On the other hand, there was also a shift away from a Weberian model where the objective of the administrative system was the general interest, a shared objective among all civil servants, wherever they were located. The generalized rational choice model, which implies that the individual objectives are also pre-dominant in the public sector sphere, had resulted in a dystopian model of public administration with private interests.

Finally, the economic neo-institutional model of principles and agents has been imported into the public sector. This has resulted in a shift from trusting harmony models to distrusting conflict models. Principals cannot trust agents, and agents cannot trust principals. Again, this is more an expression of a dystopian model, rather than a utopian harmony model of shared objectives of trusting principles and agents.

Utopian dimensions in public sector reform. On top of this, there is a growing agenda to move from a utopian governance (including democracy) to a dystopian governance without democracy. The debate that good governance includes democracy is being discussed and is even shifting to a position of good governance in non-democratic systems.²¹

The whole debate of Public Value—the value of “public” and public values as operational variables—is also increasingly included in the normative context. It ultimately means a discussion on the definitions of “good” in “good governance” and “Public Value.”

There is a broad agenda to discuss systemic utopian reforms such as “Worldwide PA,” which includes wicked problems with

²¹ Ezra Suleiman, *Dismantling Democratic States* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003); Francis Fukuyama, *State Building: Governance and World Order in the 21st Century* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004).

transborder policy issues; sustainable development (what is ultimately sustainable?); governing without government (autopoeisis, self-regulation); good governance (indicators); corruption-free systems; full participation of stakeholders (co-design, co-decide, co-implement, co-evaluate); full transparency (Transparency International Index); economic, efficient, and effective policies; trusting public administrations; and ethical governments and public sectors.

There are two cases that demonstrate the global utopian ambition that major institutions have, such as the World Bank and the United Nations. In this section the two cases of the World Bank (Worldwide Governance Indicators), and the UN (Millennium Objectives, and since 2015 the Sustainable Development Goals) are developed as an expression of evidence-based utopias.

The whole scientific agenda of “Good Governance” has a clear utopian dimension. The following checklist of Worldwide Governance Indicators (WGI)²² is almost like a utopian list of “what should be done”:

1. The process by which governments are selected, monitored, and replaced:
 - Voice and Accountability
 - Political Stability and Absence of Violence/Terrorism
2. The capacity of the government to effectively formulate and implement sound policies:

²² Daniel Kaufmann, Aart Kraay, and Massimo Mastruzzi, *The Worldwide Governance Indicators: Methodology and Analytical Issues*, Policy Research Working Paper No. WPS 5430 (Washington, DC: World Bank, 2010), 4. <http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/630421468336563314/The-worldwide-governance-indicators-methodology-and-analytical-issues>.

- Government Effectiveness
 - Regulatory Quality
3. The respect of citizens and the state for the institutions that govern economic and social interactions among them:
- Rule of Law
 - Control of Corruption

Following are the UN Millennium Objectives (till September 2015):²³

- Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger
- Achieve universal primary education
- Promote gender equality and empower women
- Reduce child mortality
- Improve maternal health
- Combat HIV/AIDS, malaria, and other diseases
- Ensure environmental sustainability
- Develop a global partnership for development

Since September 2015 the UN Millennium Objectives have evolved to “The UN Sustainable Development Goals” (SDG). The major differences are that all countries are involved and should contribute to the implementation and monitoring, with all their stakeholders. As paragraph 8 of the Declaration states:

We envisage a world of universal respect for human rights and human dignity, the rule of law, justice,

²³ United Nations, “We Can End Poverty: Millennium Development Goals and Beyond 2015,” UN.org, <http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/>.

equality and non-discrimination; of respect for race, ethnicity and cultural diversity; and of equal opportunity permitting the full realization of human potential and contributing to shared prosperity. A world which invests in its children and in which every child grows up free from violence and exploitation. A world in which every woman and girl enjoys full gender equality and all legal, social and economic barriers to their empowerment have been removed. A just, equitable, tolerant, open and socially inclusive world in which the needs of the most vulnerable are met.²⁴

Here is a comprehensive list of the 17 SDGs:²⁵

- Goal 1. End poverty in all its forms everywhere
- Goal 2. End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture
- Goal 3. Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages
- Goal 4. Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all
- Goal 5. Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls

²⁴ UN General Assembly, Resolution 70/1, "Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development," October 21, 2015, http://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/RES/70/1&Lang=E.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 14.

- Goal 6. Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all
- Goal 7. Ensure access to affordable, reliable, sustainable and modern energy for all
- Goal 8. Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all
- Goal 9. Build resilient infrastructure, promote inclusive and sustainable industrialization and foster innovation
- Goal 10. Reduce inequality within and among countries
- Goal 11. Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable
- Goal 12. Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns
- Goal 13. Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts
- Goal 14. Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development
- Goal 15. Protect, restore and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, and halt and reverse land degradation and halt biodiversity loss
- Goal 16. Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels

Goal 17. Strengthen the means of implementation and
revitalize the Global Partnership for
Sustainable Development

The starting verbs have different degrees of ambition, and therefore some are utopian (e.g., end, achieve), and others are much more pragmatic (e.g., strengthen, promote, reduce, ensure).

When the content of policies is studied, it is clear that many policies are related to utopias:

- Ecotopia wants a society with full respect for the ecological agenda, or at least a respect for the triple economic, social, and ecological bottom lines.
- The ideal city—the dream of a perfect city—has been around for the history of humanity. The search for the ideal city has resulted in many utopias to include cities in their models.

Therefore, many Public Administration and Public Policy studies include objectives such as education for all, health for all, housing for all, security for all, etc.

Environment and Utopia. Let us develop a special case that became explicit in the ecotopian agenda. Environmental catastrophes and scenarios have triggered discourses to save the world. They have also resulted in radical solutions based on experts (administrative rationalism), people (democratic pragmatism), or markets (economic rationalism).²⁶ As well, they have resulted in ecotopias such as that in Ernest Callenbach's novel, where a New

²⁶ John S. Dryzek, *The Politics of the Earth, Environmental Discourses* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).

York Times-Post reporter, Will Weston, after twenty years and as the first outsider, visits Ecotopia, which was founded when Northern California, Oregon, and Washington seceded from the Union and created a stable-state ecosystem.²⁷ Ecotopia has a perfect balance between human beings and the environment. In his overview of ecological utopias, Marius de Geus refers to the historical “austerity”-utopias where it is common to self-restrain consumption (More), to live ultimately a simple life (Thoreau), and with simple beauty (Morris).²⁸ The contemporary versions are about ecological city gardens (Howard), green communities (Skinner), paradise islands (Huxley), or a “stable state society” (Callenbach).²⁹ It is clear that ecological utopias have inspired environmental debates and the ideologies of green parties. One could probably also read the Encyclical Letter *Laudato Si*, which is “on care for our common home” and calls for a “global ecological conversion,” “a new lifestyle,” and “ecological citizenship” as inspired by a utopian vision.³⁰

Policies realizing utopias? Eradicating extreme poverty is a “classical” utopia. The World Bank Group’s mission is “Our Dream is a World Free of Poverty.” According to the World Bank,

There has been marked progress on reducing poverty over the past decades. The world attained the first Millennium Development Goal target—to cut the

²⁷ Ernest Callenbach, *Ecotopia: The Notebooks and Reports of William Weston* (New York: Bantam Books, 1990).

²⁸ Marius de Geus, *Ecologische Utopieën: Ecotopia's En Het Milieudebat* (Utrecht: Van Arkel, 1996).

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Francis, *Laudato Si*, Encyclical Letter on Care for Our Common Home (Vatican: Holy See, 2015).

1990 poverty rate in half by 2015—five years ahead of schedule, in 2010. Despite the progress made in reducing poverty, the number of people living in extreme poverty globally remains unacceptably high. . . . According to the most recent estimates, in 2013, 12.7 percent of people in the developing world lived at or below \$1.90 a day, compared to 12.4 percent in 2012. That’s down from 35 percent in 1990.³¹

This is also explicitly part of the UN SDGs, beginning with the first goal of putting an end to poverty:³²

Goal 1: End poverty in all its forms everywhere

- By 2030, eradicate extreme poverty for all people everywhere, currently measured as people living on less than \$1.25 a day
- By 2030, reduce at least by half the proportion of men, women and children of all ages living in poverty in all its dimensions according to national definitions
- Implement nationally appropriate social protection systems and measures for all, including floors, and by 2030 achieve substantial coverage of the poor and the vulnerable
- By 2030, ensure that all men and women, in particular the poor and the vulnerable, have

³¹ “Overview,” Last updated October 2, 2016, <http://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/poverty/overview>.

³² UN General Assembly, Resolution 70/1, 15.

equal rights to economic resources, as well as access to basic services, ownership and control over land and other forms of property, inheritance, natural resources, appropriate new technology and financial services, including microfinance

- By 2030, build the resilience of the poor and those in vulnerable situations and reduce their exposure and vulnerability to climate-related extreme events and other economic, social and environmental shocks and disasters

1.a Ensure significant mobilization of resources from a variety of sources, including through enhanced development cooperation, in order to provide adequate and predictable means for developing countries, in particular least developed countries, to implement programmes and policies to end poverty in all its dimensions

1.b Create sound policy frameworks at the national, regional and international levels, based on pro-poor and gender-sensitive development strategies, to support accelerated investment in poverty eradication actions

These goals could be considered utopian because of their sky-high targets. However, they also take the nature of long-term strategic thinking. There is a specific date (2030) to realize the SDGs. The question is whether there should be dates by which utopias need to be realized.

In general, there is no indication of a clear trajectory of how to get to the result. Yet, there is some indication of a roadmap

with actors, indicators, stepping stones, and operational national plans. From this point of view this text is a signed document with an official and institutionalized status, not just an intuitive utopian driving text. Nevertheless, these SDGs have a utopian connotation and, once they are realized, can be considered as a realized utopia.

4. From Utopias to Future Realities

Realized utopias: Beginning or end of Utopia? While “realized utopias” may sound like an oxymoron, the fact is that man has walked on the moon and certain diseases have been eradicated. In this perspective an old utopia is confronted and applied to a new reality. Utopia is “a uniquely effective form of politics. . . . Elements of the utopia are gradually assimilated by the outside world, altering it in subtle but sometimes profound ways...”³³ Unfortunately, dystopias as well as utopias have been realized. Hans Achterhuis refers for example to Orwell’s *1984* and “big brother” and to Foucault’s Panopticon.³⁴ From this point of view, different utopias could be at the beginning and at the end of a reality.

How to use “utopias”—and how not to use them. Utopias and dystopias have been useful in reviewing the past, for knowing what is desirable and feasible. If it helps to better understand the past then, does it also help to better understand the future?

Even if for the last five hundred years “utopianism has been one of mankind’s principal navigational instruments,” the great

³³ Pamela Neville-Sington and David Sington, *Paradise Dreamed: How Utopian Thinkers Have Changed the Modern World* (London: Bloomsbury, 1993), 255.

³⁴ Hans Achterhuis, *De Erfenis van de Utopie* (Amsterdam: Ambo, 1998), 303.

lesson of the twentieth century is “that asking for a blueprint of the ideal society is asking for trouble.”³⁵ Utopias are a “mental experiment,” where the “imaginary procedure is used to test scientific ideas, not against the real world, but against each other, to reveal the connections between them and to seek out contradictions.”³⁶ Therefore, utopias are “useful as a tool of political thought,” since they force us “to look at our unexamined assumptions, to explore those things which otherwise remain undisputed and undiscussed. . . . Utopia is the perfect vehicle . . . , the field of opinion where they can influence social change.”³⁷

Our realities are not always moving in a positive sense. There is, for example, a reality of “dismantling democratic states.”³⁸ Also, there are “only the politics of fear and the politics of trust.”³⁹ Yet, utopia could also be mapping and developing this fear. In a logic of dialectics, a “thesis”-situation of catastrophic deficits and of fear could trigger a utopia as “anti-thesis” that is hopeful and reversing this fearful reality.⁴⁰ An example of this utopian anti-thesis could be the New Jerusalem. Joachim of Fiori (1135-1202) developed his “age of the spirit” and a revolutionary theology that inspired several utopias, including More’s and Charles Péguy’s *Cité Harmonieuse*.⁴¹ Obviously, utopias could also call for “resistance to civil government” to be able to create a new “walden.”⁴²

³⁵ Neville-Sington and Sington, 253, 254.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 255.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ Suleiman, *Dismantling Democratic States*.

³⁹ Al Gore, “The Politics of Fear,” *Social Research* 71, no. 4 (Winter 2004): 792.

⁴⁰ Achterhuis, 94.

⁴¹ Henri de Lubac, *La postérité spirituelle de Joachim de Flore: de Joachim à Schelling* (Paris: Editions Lethielleux, 1978).

⁴² Henry David Thoreau, *Walden; Resistance to Civil Government: Authoritative Texts, Journal, Reviews, and Essays in Criticism*, eds. William Rossi and Owen Thomas (New York: W.W. Norton, 1991).

Finally, utopias may contribute to an agenda of voluntarism and develop a strategy against fatalism. There are three situations where fatalism could emerge and weaken or even destroy proactive voluntarism and utopias. There could be systemic determinism that explains why some systems will always be more successful than others. When “Guns, Germs, and Steel” determine the fates of human societies,⁴³ European/Western and Asian societies will always dominate. When catastrophes are frequently swiping civilizations it also affects the capacity to surmount them with utopias. The current research on catastrophes includes five characteristics: disaster, hazard, vulnerability, resilience, and culture.⁴⁴ These are combined with the “risk” terminology in the current policy and management research. Finally, when chaos overrules systems and “God plays dice,”⁴⁵ utopia is again a perspective to fight fatalism.

Using “utopia” for social sciences. For H.G. Wells, it is clear that utopias and science are related.⁴⁶

According to this logic it is important to bring utopias back to social sciences (topic, method, project) to develop “possible futures.” For Norbert Elias “utopia” becomes part of a social science research toolkit, just like critique of sources, statistics, studies of trajectories, reconstructing networks, content analysis, reception studies, comparison, etc.⁴⁷ Utopia as a social science

⁴³ Jared Diamond, *Guns, Germs, and Steel: The Fates of Human Societies* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1999).

⁴⁴ François Walter, *Catastrophes, Une Histoire Culturelle, XVI-XXI Siècle* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 2008), 17.

⁴⁵ Ian Stewart, *Does God Play Dice? The New Mathematics of Chaos* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1997).

⁴⁶ H.G. Wells, *A Modern Utopia* (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1917), 350.

⁴⁷ Elias, *L'utopie*.

technique allows us to look at potentials for realization, gap analysis, and possible futures.

One of the key tensions for social sciences is the scientific challenge of different development dynamics and levels of knowledge between, on the one hand, the knowledge and handling of bio- and technological systems⁴⁸ and, on the other, the knowledge and handling of social/societal mechanisms and systems. This increasing distance, and this diverging scientific dynamics, create a real disequilibrium in a functional development of systems. This results in tension between realized technological utopias and unrealized social utopias. Technological realities challenge increasingly social utopias. As a result, technological progress triggers social dystopias. However, according to Pierre Musso, “social utopias will be realized by and within technical utopias.”⁴⁹

Utopias also put more emphasis on teleological rationality, rather than causality, for change patterns. They make path dependency, bifurcations, constraints in the perspective of reverse logics, backward mapping, effect/cause or objective/means logics more central.

Social and Political Utopias

More's *Utopia* is first and foremost a social and political utopia. According to John Micklethwait and Adrian Wooldridge, a first revolution in the seventeenth century resulted in kings and queens

⁴⁸ Walter Isaacson, “Inventing the Future,” *Time Magazine, The Genius Issue* (December 1-8, 2014), 54-82.

⁴⁹ Pierre Musso, “De la socio-utopie à la techno-utopie,” *Le Monde Diplomatique*, no. 112 (Août-Septembre 2010): 8.

building centrally administrated states.⁵⁰ Cromwell supported Henry VIII in this endeavor, and Thomas More was a witness and an actor in this revolution. This centralized state grew into a Hobbesian Leviathan, which triggered a second revolution, exemplified by the French and the American revolutions, with a focus on meritocracy and accountable administrations, which in their turn in the third revolution evolved into the modern welfare state. This resulted in “big government,” which triggered a fourth revolution, based on ICT and management, which will determine a sustainable state with a future. Each of these revolutions had its own utopias. Further, of course, there have also been the communist and the liberal utopias, the failure of which has had such a negative impact on the credibility and the attraction of social utopias in general, and the never-to-be-forgotten dystopias of Nazism and fascism. Through all these developments it became clear that societies are less malleable than one might have hoped (or feared). This raises a question that many chapters in More’s book contend with, the question of how to remain utopian in the light of the skeptical insights of the social sciences.

Technological Utopias

From the nineteenth century onwards, technological utopias have surfaced, reflecting the reality of a technological and industrial revolution. This connection means that utopias are not just illusions, but real locations for revelation and observation of

⁵⁰ John Micklethwait and Adrian Wooldridge, *The Fourth Revolution: The Global Race to Reinvent the State* (New York: Penguin Books, 2014).

these realities. Technological optimism thus creates the positive perspective of a glorious future.

Yet, technological progress and social development do not always go hand in hand. There is a large difference between the development dynamics of, on the one hand, biological and technological systems, and, on the other, social/societal mechanisms and systems. This disparity may create a real disequilibrium in the functional development of systems and result in tensions between realized technological utopias and unrealized social utopias. Technological realities increasingly challenge social utopias. As a result, technological progress often triggers social dystopias. At the same time, however, social utopias need to be realized by and within technical utopias. How can this tense but necessary symbiosis between technology and society be articulated?

Ecological Utopias

Environmental catastrophes and scenarios have led to appeals to save the world. They have resulted in ecotopias or societies without gender hierarchies (Marge Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time*). Ecological utopias have strengthened the growing awareness of the need for change. Given the urgency of the ecological challenges, they have recently become more prominent, with a corresponding rise in ecologically dystopian literature.

Human Enhancement Utopias

Recent progress in biomedical sciences is pushing us to look at human enhancement either as a utopia or a dystopia. Cyborgs have long inspired anxiety and concern, but have also been seen

as gateways to a better future. If we will soon be able to create new organs, why not replace our brains? And if we can freely manipulate our genetic make-up, why not construct superhuman beings? On the other hand, if we can create machines with superior artificial intelligence that also show emotions, will these humanoids not be much better equipped to tackle the challenges of the future? The dream of refashioning the human being itself, as the most recent type of utopia, was of course not yet present in More's *Utopia*, but several aspects of it are explored in the debates 500 years later.

Utopias and Science

Despite the seeming inescapable tension between scientific research and the description of an *ou-topos*, a non-existent place, and the fact that utopias cannot change the laws of nature, science and utopias can be related. As an example, H.G. Wells explicitly states: "I have inserted certain sections reflecting upon the established methods of sociological and economic science" and "It is good discipline for the Utopist to visit this world occasionally."⁵¹

Utopian thinking raises interesting challenges for the social sciences. Are they capable of really developing "possible futures?" For Elias this helps to re-evaluate the role of imagination in social sciences and opposes the fatalism of pragmatism in research and policies.

Utopian thinking may also be important for natural and biomedical sciences. In many of these sciences the future is seen as open and to be influenced by humanity. Yet, precisely because

⁵¹ Wells, 7, 350.

the future is open, it is crucial to think about the kind of future we want. Scientific research itself is path-dependent. Utopias sketch possible futures and invite research that may lead us in the right direction while dystopias act as a warning against possible destructive developments.

Conclusion: Why Utopian Thinking at Universities?

When revolutions are driven by utopias, they may result in excesses that conflict with the premises of these utopias.

Utopias may be dangerous. Yet they may also be constructive, and perhaps even necessary.

Utopias are motivating. They help us to discover possible and desirable futures, whereas dystopias make us aware of possible but undesirable futures. “Utopias are realized piecemeal, but realized they frequently are.”⁵² Because they allow for a shared analysis and shared imagined ideals, utopias also allow for a voluntarist appeal to contribute to change, even revolution. And because they challenge realities, utopias can be a remedy against fear and even help forward an agenda of hope for the future.

Utopias confront us with the gaps in our knowledge. They form a “mental experiment” in which the “imaginary procedure is used to test scientific ideas, not against the real world, but against each other, to reveal the connections between them and to seek out contradictions.”⁵³ Therefore, utopias are “useful as a tool of political thought,” since they force us “to look at our unexamined

⁵² Neville-Sington and Sington, 255.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

assumptions, to explore those things which otherwise remain undisputed and undiscussed.”⁵⁴

Utopias invite a discussion on values, norms, and cultures—and on the interactions between values and science. They force us to confront scientific insights with the social consequences they may lead to. In their attempt to sketch a coherent picture of a possible future, they imply a reflection on the place of science in the process of creating that future.

Utopias may contribute to the development of a strategy against fatalism. There is a tendency towards determinism in each scientific endeavor, yet a strong belief in determinism makes all action futile. Utopias force us to consider the limits of determinism. Are there social mechanisms that cannot easily be changed?

Scientific insights are indispensable as well, since they can indicate at which point utopias become dangerous because of unwanted side effects, or infeasible because they neglect either the imperfect malleability of humanity and society or the ecological and physical constraints that we cannot escape. Utopias put scientific insights into perspective. When confronted with scientific insights, utopias may be dangerous, misleading, or irritating as much as they can be fascinating, inspiring, motivating, or stimulating. We cannot do without scientific insights. Neither can we do without utopias.

Ultimately, utopias help us to develop possible and desirable futures⁵⁵ as well as think critically about impossible and undesirable

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Elias, "A quoi servent les utopies scientifiques," 216.

futures. For this reason, utopias keep us awake and give us “the courage to be utopian.”⁵⁶

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⁵⁶ Serge Halimi, "Le courage d'être utopique," *Le Monde Diplomatique*, no.112 (Août-Septembre 2010): 8

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