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[Review of] Utopia in the Age of Survival: Between Myth and Politics (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2021), by S. D. Chrostowska

Citation for published version:

Thaler, M 2023, '[Review of] Utopia in the Age of Survival: Between Myth and Politics (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2021), by S. D. Chrostowska', *Review of Politics*, vol. 85, no. 1, pp. 141–144.
<https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034670522000869>

Digital Object Identifier (DOI):

[10.1017/S0034670522000869](https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034670522000869)

Link:

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

Document Version:

Early version, also known as pre-print

Published In:

Review of Politics

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This is the pre-print, pre-proofread version of a review published in *Review of Politics*: Thaler, Mathias. Review of *Utopia in the Age of Survival: Between Myth and Politics* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2021), by S. D. Chrostowska. *The Review of Politics* 85, no. 1 (2023): 141–44. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034670522000869>.

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S. D. Chrostowska, *Utopia in the Age of Survival: Between Myth and Politics* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2021. Pp. 215).

S. D. Chrostowska's thought-provoking new book invites several interpretations. The one I privilege in this review focuses on the book's capacity to potentially change our reading habits as political theorists. There will be other ways in which readers may benefit from these densely argued reflections on the promise of utopianism today.

On the face of it, *Utopia in the Age of Survival* intervenes into a debate that has recently gained traction, whether in the form of discussions about the demandingness of moral principles in analytical political theory or of controversies around the relationship between realism and utopianism. Political theorists from different intellectual traditions are once again grappling with key questions of the utopian canon.

Curiously absent from most of these engagements is the willingness and ability to enter into a dialogue with neighbouring disciplines raising similar questions. Utopian studies – a field of scholarly activities with fuzzy boundaries, crossing disciplinary frontiers between the social sciences and the humanities – has in the meantime

developed into a thriving forum for debates ranging from radical social experiments to science fiction and fantasy writing. Historians, anthropologists, sociologists, and architects too have done much to deepen our comprehension of utopianism. To anyone interested in the actual study of utopian thinking and acting, it is blatantly obvious that political theory would have a great deal to learn from these vibrant arguments.

Impressively, Chrostowska is among the few theorists who acknowledge this fact and are open to speak to a great variety of disciplines researching utopianism today. Her vastly ambitious book thus seeks to explore what the place of utopian thinking and acting might be in a world under siege from numerous systemic crises, from right-wing insurgencies to global warming.

This interdisciplinary orientation allows her to make three original points: the first concerns the complicated relationship between critique and utopia. While it is evident that all forms of utopianism have some kind of critical thrust – the ideal serves as a positive model in relation to which one may assess the sorry state of reality – it is far from clear whether its specific mode of critique has beneficial or nefarious effects for actual social change. Against this backdrop, *Utopia in the Age of Survival* makes the case for recovering the multi-layered notion of “myth” to infuse socialism with new energy. In a thoughtful reading of Roland Barthes, Chrostowska shows that there is much to be gained from deciphering dreams of a brighter future as mythical in nature.

The book’s second insight turns around re-centring the body as a central preoccupation for utopian thinking and acting. Highlighting the continued importance of Charles Fourier for the surrealist movement, and later the Situationist International as well as the revolutionaries of May ’68, Chrostowska asks whether somatic passions should play a vital role in re-igniting the left-wing desire for transformation. While she

stops short of giving an unequivocally affirmative answer, the book reminds us that all hopes are embodied, thus going beyond the abstract stipulation of a perfect commonwealth.

Chrostowska's third thesis relates to the historical juncture within which she situates the current resurgence of utopianism: we live, she claims, in an age of survival, dominated by the neoliberal state's power to control our everyday lives. In this context, one needs to carefully examine the contradictory potentials of life and death so as to inaugurate a utopian politics of survival that is liberated from an overly narrow focus on biopolitics.

Although these are, on my analysis, the central lessons we can extract from this book, they are not easily identifiable as such. This openness to various, perhaps even conflicting, readings seems intended, as Chrostowska states that "[t]hose interested in a systematic, comprehensive review of available conceptions of utopia and a thorough treatment of individual themes united in this book will be better served elsewhere" (23).

Instead of striving for systematicity and comprehensiveness, the book is written in the poetic register of aphoristic reflection. Broad statements of partisan support (usually for left-wing causes) are interspersed with close readings of important writers from the utopian canon (mostly Ernst Bloch and Miguel Abensour, but also Ruth Levitas). Moreover, the argument is sometimes articulated with the help of rather heavy jargon, in ways that might deter some readers. A lot of Chrostowska's ideas therefore reveal themselves in the space between what is being openly stated and what is merely being assumed and left unspoken.

Utopia in the Age of Survival will, I believe, remain mostly inaccessible to anyone who does not already know a lot about the topics discussed therein. This propensity for

elliptical presentation makes for an unusual, but potentially still rewarding, reading experience for many political theorists. The rewards will be the greater the more one is willing and able to embark on the extra interpretive work of connecting the dots between observations that are illuminating in themselves, but not necessarily integrated into an overarching framework.

I have three general concerns about this theorization of utopianism. The first pertains to the author's reluctance to openly locate her standpoint in the wider discussion on the merits and perils of utopianism. Since a concise, workable definition of utopianism is missing from the book, the reader will have a hard time holding on to Chrostowska's voice within the chorus of intersecting positions that she draws on. This strikes me as problematic because, without an authorial banister, the material surveyed in this relatively short book is rather difficult to grasp and evaluate.

My second worry touches on a related issue: Chrostowska appears to take it for granted that readers will share her starting point. This is especially challenging when it comes to understanding the role of utopian thinking and acting for the sake of social change. An implicit assumption throughout this book is that utopia has always been the prerogative of the left. Through her powerful invocation of mythmaking, Chrostowska attempts to ensure that this remains so, especially in the face of melancholic and nostalgic trends in contemporary socialism. But this move occludes the undeniable fact that both left- and right-wing projects can be fuelled by utopian aspirations. Since Chrostowska does not elaborate on utopia's normative status, the reader is subsequently left without the conceptual tools to separate modes of utopian thinking and acting that can help us in this "age of survival" from those that might lead us astray.

Thirdly, the density of the prose sometimes overwhelms the substance of the argument. This is counterproductive because, once again, Chrostowska's interpretive range is remarkable and admirable. In times of academic (over-)specialization, we need books that start from precisely the premise that this book does: inward-looking engagements with utopianism, such as the ones dominating ongoing discussions in political theory, by default reduce the complexity of the phenomenon under scrutiny. This book does not. The problem remains, however, that the text's audience is addressed as "already in the know". This leaves the wider ramifications of Chrostowska's arguments unexplored – a missed opportunity.

What I am lamenting, in sum, is not so much the lack of systematicity and comprehensiveness, which Chrostowska fully owns. Rather, upon finishing the book, I wished that it had been more geared toward those political theorists who do not (a) have a definite sense of utopianism's promise and danger, nor (b) feel confident to adjudicate between different formations of the utopian desire.

These qualms notwithstanding and considering its many insightful observations, I am convinced that students of utopia across different disciplines as well as political theorists more specifically will benefit from dealing with *Utopia in the Age of Survival*. At the very least, it will challenge, and perhaps even expand, their established reading habits.

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