

The tragedy of utopia in the age of the Anthropocene: Beyond dystopia, despair and catastrophic futures

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journals.sagepub.com/home/est**Mark Featherstone** *Keele University, Keele, Staffordshire, UK*

Abstract

My key objective in this article is to explore the history of the concept of utopia and its application in really existing social, political, economic and cultural forms. Starting with a consideration of what I call the economy of utopia, I theorise the desire for the ideal society in terms of a deeply human drive to seek to overcome vulnerability, limitation and finitude that is set upon failure and the fall towards dystopia by virtue of the fact that it is this very lack that defines the being of the human animal. Following this section of the article, in the second part of my piece, I move on to trace the history of utopia from the visions of Ancients, through the idealism of the Moderns, up to the champions of the theory of the end of history and a utopian version of capitalism. Finally, in conclusion, I focus on the catastrophic impacts of this global utopia of capitalism realised in the form of the Anthropocene and imagine a truly human, tragic utopia founded upon a recognition of our constitutive lack, vulnerability and finitude.

Keywords

Anthropocene, catastrophe, dystopia, tragedy, utopia

The economics of utopia

The traditional way of thinking about the idea of utopia is in terms of a concept that describes the envisioning of ideal social, political, economic and cultural models or

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systems that contrast with those currently operative either within a particular society or societies in general (Levitas, 2011). Although this approach to definition enables one to capture a range of visions of ideal societies across the span of human history and characterise them as utopias, it does not provide an explanation for the impulse driving utopian thinking. Understanding the will to utopia in terms of the desire or the wish for a better world clearly captures much of what animates the history of the ideal society. However, I want to develop this idea of utopia as desire in the introduction of my article by sketching out what I want to call the economics of utopia. The purpose of this attempt to understand the tendency towards utopia in terms of economics will become clear later in the article when I will seek to explain what I take to be the key forms of utopia in the contemporary world, but for the moment I will concentrate on setting out my economic perspective. In writing of the economy of utopia, I am not seeking to restrict my understanding of utopia to the discipline of economics or think about it in terms of the distribution of goods or resources, though as I will show much of the history of utopia has been about the rational distribution of goods or the desire to possess this, that or the other commodity, but rather to suggest that the history of utopia can be explained in terms of what we might call an imbalance or lack of symmetry at the heart of what it means to be human. Thus, the conceptualisation of utopia I want to set out in this piece is essentially an ontological one concerned with the nature of human being and becoming. This is, in my view, why the notion of utopia, at least understood in broadest terms, remains such a powerful, durable, idea that has persisted over more or less the entirety of human history. But what is this imbalance or dissymmetry of the human that means that we are fated to be utopian?

In this regard, my initial thesis, which will become important for my later explanation of the nature of the contemporary utopia, rests on a reading of Heideggerian phenomenology (Heidegger, 2010) and Lacanian psychoanalysis (Lacan, 2007) and centrally the idea that because humans are finite creatures that are able to reflect upon their own finitude and thus seek to overcome it, they are driven forward by a desire to escape their own constitutive lack on an emotional, social, political, economic and cultural level. Given human finitude, and the fact that we are thrown into the world in a state which is similarly characterised by lack and freedom, we live through becoming, which we might understand in terms of the relationship between loss and the possibility of escape from this condition into the future characterised by plenitude. From a Lacanian point of view, we might think about this need for escape in terms of desire, whereas Heidegger would refer to the ontological condition of anxiety. By contrast, others, such as Deleuze and Guattari (1987), emphasise abundance and the radical rhizomatic nature of lines of flight away from the imposition of Oedipal prohibitions and limits. But regardless of the theoretical perspective we choose to adopt, the key thesis I want to present in this piece is one where the human condition is defined by an economy of lack and attempts to overcome this initial deficit, which, I suggest, we should understand through the concept of excess or ex-cess. Why excess (ex-cess)? The reason I make the point that efforts to overcome lack should be thought about in terms of excess is because they necessarily exceed a prior state and thus represent a form of transgression, which, it is very important to note, is endlessly durable in the sense that efforts to escape the initial state of deficiency must be repeated *ad infinitum*. This is the case because the outcome of the

transgressive utopian imaginary or practice is never equivalent to the state of constitutive lack by virtue of the fact that what has been lost or is felt to be missing has already passed over into history or what is imagined to be history. But how, then, can we mobilise this theory of human being and becoming to understand the notion of utopia and to what end?

The point of my Heideggerian/Lacanian phenomenological/psychoanalytic theory of the economy of utopia is that we might use the notion of a human condition organised around an endless cycle of lack and excess to understand the history of utopia and expressions of the utopian by thinking about the way that the tension between finitude and the attempt to overcome this in time uniquely positions humanity in history, where history refers to the attempt to make sense and represent what has been lost in narrative form. If history, and historical construction, is about understanding the passage of time, what has passed, and what has been lost, then I want to make the case that the idea of utopia is essentially about a process of moral accounting, projecting forward and overcoming what is lacking in the present and has been lost to the past in some distant future, which may very well represent a rearticulation of an imagined prehistoric period. However, in much the same way that it is possible to understand the idea of utopia in a temporal sense, by thinking about the way we seek to compensate for our lack today by imagining plenitude tomorrow, I would make the case that same can be seen to apply to the spatial coordinates that similarly frame human lived experience. In this respect, what may appear to be lacking *here* can be overcome in visions of *there* and other places that appear infinitely prosperous. Thus, my suggestion is that utopia, and the utopian impulse, is a reflection of the economy of the human condition projected towards a social, political, economic and cultural level of representation where what is lacking, lost or seen to be deficient about the here and now is overcome through hope and a desire to ensure that the future over there is better than contemporary lived experience. In the key forms of the utopian imaginary set out below, which we can categorise in terms of a mixture of science fiction, theoretical modelling and various approaches to sociological mapping, other times and other places replace the *lack worlds of this time and this place* with visions of plenitude through the realisation of hope. The key ontological quality of utopia and the utopian thus resides in its excessive nature. It is always tending towards some other time or some other place in the future over there.

In this regard, thinking about the notion of utopia in terms of the human condition and the ways in which this interacts with the basic experience of temporal and spatial imaginaries makes it possible to think about the idea of utopia in universal terms connected to the constructedness of the world. From this point of view, utopia and the utopian impulse are representative of the human condition of conscious finitude that seeks to overcome itself in visions of the infinite that are fated to fail because they aim to transgress the basic ontological reality of our being that always already lacks (Heidegger, 2010; Lacan, 2007). Thus, utopian hope, dystopian despair and the tragic relationship between these two conditions might be understood using the same theoretical model. Enter the problem of the disappointment of utopia. Given the above theory of the economy of utopia, I would make the case that utopian visions cannot escape a logic of disappointment, simply because humans are finite creatures that cannot live up to what they can imagine. In this way, the fall of the utopian ideal towards the vision of the dystopia of the worst possible world might be understood in terms of a logic of despair,

which occurs when the excessive attempt to overcome the constitutive lack at the heart of the human crashes upon the rocks of the impossibility of escape from the loss that reflects our basic ontological reality. We see representations of this condition, which might be seen to connect the utopian impulse to the history of dystopia, repeated over and over again in the history of utopia that I will trace in this article. While the story of utopia requires virtue, morality and goodness, dystopia represents the fallen nature of the human and tends to reflect human behaviours driven by greed, lust, excessive pride and a fear of the other. In this respect, the history of dystopia is also a history of the desire for utopia and the will to escape from the finitude of human being anew (Featherstone, 2007).

Building upon this theory of the essential historicity of utopia, its essential relationship to human finitude, the impossible desire for the infinite and the necessary disappointment and fall towards the despair of dystopia, in what follows I propose to trace the history of the economy of utopian desire and its failure from the mythological and philosophical utopias of the Ancients, through the realist and applied utopias of the Moderns, up to globalised and high-tech utopias of the post-moderns. Setting out this history, which will take in reference to the utopias of Baudrillard (2010), Hayek (2012), Hesiod (2018), Marx (1998a), McLuhan (2001), More (2008), Plato (1991), and a range of others, my key point will be to outline a tendency towards increasing abstraction and virtuality applied in a broader context characterised by increased instrumentality and profanity. As a result, in the case of the high-tech cybernetic capitalist utopia of the late twentieth century/early twenty-first century, I will seek to show how this tendency has led to a situation where a particular vision of utopia has come to overshadow the earth itself in a situation we might talk about in terms of the triumph of infinite, instrumental hope over the reality of human and indeed biospheric finitude. Although this may sound positive, and reflective of the desire of humanity to overcome its own limitations in the name of social improvement, the point I want to make is concerned with hubris, the perverse nature of this particular utopian ideal and moment when the drive to improve and progress tips over into a nightmarish scenario that refuses to acknowledge the constitutive weakness of organic life (Foster et al., 2010).

While the consequences of the globalisation of this particular utopia form, a utopian version of neoliberal capitalism really existing in virtual space, were not immediately clear to those living through the expansion of this idealised social, political, economic and cultural system in the 1990s, it is now painfully clear in the early twenty-first century that this vision of a utopian future realised in practice is exhausting the world and leading to a situation where this model of society, which is utopian by virtue of the ways in which it seeks to abolish lack, limitation and embodied reality, has become entirely unsustainable. If the purpose of utopia, as I have suggested above, is concerned with the imagination of an idealised future outside of the passage of time, extension of space and the normal process of loss that every finite creature must endure, then how would we characterise the fate of the contemporary capitalist utopia? In the case of this utopia, the utopia of the Anthropocene, which in many respects exemplifies the objective of the utopian imaginary, in the sense that it seeks to abolish change through an endless repetitive commitment to the growth of the same, the future appears to have collapsed towards a vision of the very worst kind of society. In a formal sense, then, the

Anthropocene seems to capture and complete the purpose of utopia, by representing the moment when humanity realises its domination over nature on a planetary scale, but at same time appears to lose the possibility of the future which dissolves into a kind of rolling catastrophe. Under these conditions, it may be that the form of utopianism most appropriate for understanding the present is the Jewish messianic version set out in the Hebrew Bible that was popularised in the period when Rome represented a kind of eternal, dystopian city (Ferguson, 1975; Lowy, 1992).

From the point of view of the history of the classical utopia, where, as I will seek to show, the purpose was to exchange the future of a kind of endless present marked by lack for a future of eternity where plenitude would win out, there are elements of the Anthropocene that would seem to represent the realisation of utopia, but this would be a dark future or dystopian future of over-production, luxury, decadence, ruination and collapse reflective of the kind of endless catastrophe Walter Benjamin (2006) wrote about in his theses on the nature of history. As one of the key thinkers of the modern version of the messianic utopian tradition, which connected collapse to the possibility of the new, Benjamin explained, through reference to Paul Klee's famous image of the *Angelus Novus*, that progress, and the process of moving forward in order to escape the past, should be seen to represent a history of ruin, catastrophe and destruction that piles rubble upon rubble in the name of overcoming. In this situation, endless catastrophe is the result of a misrecognition of the limits of utopia, which, I have sought to explain, should reside in the ontological reality of the human condition balanced between natural animal finitude and a kind of phenomenological psychological tendency towards the infinite. Balanced between these two conditions, utopia is a borderline idea focused on the drive towards the paradoxical realisation of impossibility, hence its relationship to modernity, dystopia, despair and disappointment. We remember that it was precisely these conditions that Benjamin sought to emphasise in his messianic utopianism to suggest that ruination is the gateway of possibility. This is also why the contemporary moment is, in my view, reflective of the end of one vision of utopia, a vision concerned with idealisation and the achievement of human plenitude beyond lack and limitation, and the emergence of an alternative, paradoxical, ironic form focused on tragedy and an acceptance of loss, lack, weakness, vulnerability, finitude and what is not possible. If the utopia of progress is over, and we must face up to the possibility of apocalyptic collapse, the key question is what comes next. This is, in my view, the moment of the utopia of rubble, ruin, weakness and finitude.

Why have we reached this point now? What is it about the present that means that the concept of utopia needs to be rethought? My answer to this question, which I will seek to explain by tracing the history of utopia and the utopian imaginary, is that the contemporary late capitalist Anthropocene represents the final moment of the utopian economy of lack and excess by virtue of the fact that there is no more space to explore in search of the good place and no more time to project ourselves towards on the basis that we have little ideological sense of how we might improve human society. In light of the catastrophic consequences of the emergence of the Anthropocene, which relate to the lack of symmetry between the human and natural biospheric systems, the case I want to make in this piece is that the future of the idea of utopia and the utopian imagination must become about what Laurence Hatab (2000) calls the ethics of finitude, characterised by ideas of

ecological balance, limitation and a tragic sense of the human, which recalls the irony of More's (2008) original notion of utopia. This is what I am writing about in terms of the tragedy of utopia in the context of the Anthropocene or Entropocene, to use Bernard Stiegler's (2018) concept to capture the relationship between late capitalism, exhaustion and the abolition of the future in a dark utopia / dystopia of excess and lack.

From the golden age to the death camp and back

Regarding the historical origins of expressions of the economy of utopia, and the idea that the human condition is one of being haunted by a sense of finitude, lack and profound loss, we might return to the birth of writing in western culture and Hesiod's myth of the Golden Age set out in his *Works and Days* (2018). As Jacques Derrida (2016) explained in his reading of the *Phaedrus* (2005a), where Plato's Socrates recounts the story of the God Thoth and his present of writing, the technology of writing and in particular the grammatical construction of sentences, paragraphs, pages, books and other texts without end is one that is marked by an essential absence and a kind of void of meaning. We write, and continue to write, precisely because meaning constantly slips away. As a result, ever more words, deferral and the logic of dissemination is set in motion to cover for a kind of constitutive lack or loss of significance that Derrida sought to reveal through his method of deconstruction. By revealing the absence at the heart of the text, and any text that seeks to obscure lack through excessive writing would be subject to the same fate, Derrida thought that he could introduce an ethics of difference capable of undermining the myth of some original time or place of plenitude which leaves every other version of the present and future appearing in need to correction. In many respects, we might trace the history of this perverse idea of temporal and spatial *fullness* back to Hesiod's (2018) original utopia and think about what Mumford (1963) wrote about in terms of the story of utopia through Derrida's theory of deferral and the attempt to obscure the ontological reality of absence through fantasies of presence that are driven by a logic of desperate over-compensation. In Hesiod's (2018) story, everything starts with the fall of men from the utopian Golden Age when they lived like Gods, through the Silver, Bronze and Heroic Ages, until finally they find themselves living in the Iron Age of misery and toil. In this history of the fall, the condition of finitude, constitutive lack and freedom is the fault of Prometheus, who steals fire from the Gods and hands it over to men, which provokes Zeus to throw them out of eternity. As punishment for Prometheus' crime, Zeus offers the Titans' more foolish brother Epimetheus the present of woman, Pandora, who comes into the world to spread desire, want, misery and evil. Recalling Zeus' words, Hesiod writes 'I'll pay them back evil for fire, evil in which they find their heart's desire; they'll greet their bane with open arms!' (Hesiod, 2018, p. 5). Thrown out of the timeless, spaceless, utopia of eternity, humans enter into time, history, modernity and the search for a return to the Golden Age in some other place or some other time. In this search for eternity, they are constantly deceived by desire, 'the deathless Goddess . . . with a bitch's mind and the cunning of a thief', that 'unleashes sorry troubles upon them' (pp. 5–6).

Under these conditions, nothing would ever be the same again. In the Golden Age, Hesiod (2018) explains that humans lived free from care, every evil and 'grim old age

never encroached'. Before the fall, death came upon them like deep sleep, 'they had good things galore, a bumper yield' and lived in a state of plenty. But the birth of evil put paid to this unchanging world. In the period of the Silver Age that followed a race of great babies took over. They were reckless, lacking self-control and were unable to restrain themselves. The Bronze race was even worse. Reflecting upon the world of Bronze people, Hesiod tells us that war was their work and they loved torture, violence and gore. Following in the wake of the people of bronze with hearts of stone, the heroic Demi-Gods were better, but they soon gave way to the fifth race made of iron. Living in the Iron Age, Hesiod (2018) says he is torn, wondering whether it would be better to be dead or not even born. In this period, suffering never ends, fathers hate their sons and brothers turn on each other, in a world where the wicked lead the way. Although the poet ends his story of metallic decline by explaining that there is no hope for deliverance from evil, the rest of the story is about the value of work. It turns out that escape from the dystopia of suffering back towards something resembling the utopian Golden Age passes through honest labour. However, Hesiod was keen to temper the potential hubris of men who want out of the Iron Age. They should not expect a return to utopian plenitude. In Hesiod's (2018) myth, the moral of the story is the importance of humility, the value of labour and working towards utopia. Some of what had been lost, because of the Ur-criminality of Prometheus, could be recovered through hard work, which would eventually lead to a world of peace and stability, but men could never become Gods. However, if Hesiod's story of the Golden Age, fall, and attempt to recover a state of conditional fullness, might be seen to represent the essential form of the economy of utopia, then we should regard Plato's *Republic* (1991) as the first fully formed version of this complex projected towards a social, political, economic and cultural plan for the ideal city or human community.

Following Hesiod (2018), who locates the desire for a world of plenty in a history of decline, lack and loss, Plato follows a similar narrative running from enlightened aristocracy to psychotic tyranny and back again. Indeed, citing Arnold Toynbee, John Ferguson (1975) reports that more or less all utopias are backwards facing in some shape or form. Thus, we return to my key point about the economy of utopia. That is to say, the utopian idea that what is thought to be lacking in the present will eventually be redeemed in the future by a return to some lost state of perfection. In this regard, the history of utopia is circular. Utopian time is cyclical. Contrary to Hesiod's (2018) mythology or theology where the fall is from the sacred universe of the Gods to the profane world of men who must struggle to survive in time, the point of Plato's (1991) utopia is about men striving towards the perfection of the divine idea or form through dialectical reason in order to escape from earthbound state of the finite body. In this regard, we might discover the origins of the fall in Socrates' execution and the collapse of what Plato took for the ideal polis and understand the story of redemption and return to utopia in terms of the rediscovery of the city of the philosopher kings who are able to provide reasoned leadership to the city that would otherwise slip into a state of carnal unreason. Thus, Plato's (1991) vision of the best society was founded upon a form of political psychology, when men would only reach the utopia of the good, balance and symmetry through the exercise of reason and control of the lower drives of the body, including lust, greed and envy. While reason tended towards the theological sphere of the perfect forms

and ideas, the passions were earthbound and concerned with the things emerging from the imperfect realisation of the world of forms. In Plato's early utopia, the *Republic* (1991), the philosopher kings would rule through reason and the control of their own passions in such a way that would produce the reasonable organisation of the polis.

However, regarding the origins of Plato's vision of utopia, Ferguson (1975) explains that the Platonic idea of the good society hung onto specific elements of the mythological utopia of Homer and Hesiod, and specifically their idealisation of nature and the simple life of work. According to Ferguson, a culture of primitivism, where the lives of pre-historic humans considered more just by virtue of their lack of a craving for power, the superfluous or luxury, was centrally important in the formation of Plato's (1991) political philosophy. In this sense, Ferguson (1975) imagines Plato looking towards Sparta, and the Spartan idea of simplicity, and comparing these values to those of his own master, Socrates, who had been executed by a city that had lost its way. By contrast to Athens, which had sacrificed its very best citizen because he threatened to trouble the establishment, Sparta was defined by a basic, functional, way of life that recalled the key Socratic ideas of order, beauty and symmetry. As Elizabeth Rawson (1991) notes in her work on the city, many of the key themes running through the history of utopian thought can be traced back to Sparta. Noting the prohibition against private property, money and luxury, and other forms of excess that might weaken the resolve of its men, women and children, Rawson (1991) explains that the Spartans were characterised by their monasticism and focus on moral and physical education. They were centrally concerned to strengthen the will of the Spartan population and defend against the kind of hubris or pride that might end up producing a city of luxury, arrogance and decadence. However, Ferguson (1975) is also clear that the vision of Spartan simplicity and living within the limits of nature was not the only influence that Plato brought to bear when setting out his plan for the best city. After all, the *Republic* (1991) is about much more than Spartan primitivism, in the sense that the reason of the philosopher kings is clearly directed towards a transcendental realm that is beyond the reproduction of everyday life. In this respect, Ferguson (1975) points to the influence of Pythagoras and the Pythagorean idea of mathematical order, beauty and proportion upon Plato's ideal city and in particular his fusion of politics and economy.

Under the influence of the Pythagorean theory of the mathematical universe, Plato's philosophy became about the priority of an abstract, transcendental, rational realm and his politics took the form of a concern with the imperfect application of the principles shaping this heavenly sphere to the organisation and distribution of things in the formation of the best possible model of community. Extending this theory of rational order, Plato (1991) divides his society into three classes made up of the Philosophers, whose key contribution to the whole is intelligence, the Guardians, who possess the courage necessary to fight for the city, and finally the workers, who must be taught discipline in the name of labour and ensuring the reproduction of the community. The key characteristics of these three classes then map onto what Plato considers the cardinal virtues that must be pursued for the sake of creating the just city through the practice of dialectics. Beyond providing a method for the discovery of first principles through logical argumentation, Ferguson (1975) notes that the key purposes of the dialectical method Plato outlines in *Phaedo* (2009) were discipline, control and the education of the

passions. Although the Plato of the *Statesman* (2010) and *Critias* (2008) came to realise that the ideal of the perfectibility of man was a vain hope, an impossibility, he still held that it was possible to create the good society through the application of laws and institutions capable of containing the worst excesses of humanity. Against critics, most famously Strauss (1988), who suggest that the *Republic* was more a kind of thought experiment than a realistic plan for utopian change, I would follow Klosko (1983) in making a case for what we might call Plato's idealistic realism that became progressively more realistic in the turn from his early through middle to later works. Thus, I would argue, law and order became key to Plato's more applied later version of utopia. How, then, are we to understand this move in terms of the theory of the economy of utopia? Essentially, I would suggest that even in his later works, when he appeared to have moved away from a vision of perfectibility of man, because, of course, women and children were never perfectible, Plato thought that he could redeem humanity through the design of perfect institutions and perfect laws that would overcome our constitutive lack (Plato, 2005b). Akin to the Spartan model of society, where the individual ceases to exist in the face of the community that means everything, in Plato's (2005b) later utopia, the law is of central importance.

Developing this point about the turn to a utopia of law to overcome the limits of humanity, I think that it is possible to think about Greek utopianism in terms of the progression from Hesiod's (2018) primitive utopia through Plato's (1991) early philosophical version of the concept through to his later legalistic idea for the design of a model of society capable of moving beyond the problematic lack of humanity (Plato, 2005b). This later form of utopia might then be seen to open up a route to thinking about Roman versions of the ideal city, for example, Marcus Aurelius' vision of a perfectly moralistic/legalistic Rome, and Saint Augustine's (2003) contrast of the profane, dystopic city of the world and the divine, utopian city of God. In the case of Saint Augustine's work, the chaos of the collapse of Rome in the fourth century was a key influence for the construction of a form of city that could overcome the terror of reality. Whereas the city of the world was characterised by violence, destruction and the elevation of sin to the status of a kind of organising principle, the city of God was focused on developing a community of worship and teaching the word of the Lord. Although Saint Augustine (2003) concluded that the city of God could not be realised in this world, theological law could create a pathway to eternity for the Godly to follow. Despite the fact that the basic elements of Saint Augustine's Christian utopian worldview persisted, and elements of his vision might even be seen to survive in contemporary society, the medieval period of history is normally thought lacking in terms of a utopian imagination, perhaps because the theological imagination held such sway over people. In this period, utopia was primarily religious, concerned with God and the elevation of humanity towards Heaven, but, as Karma Lochrie (2016) has recently shown, this should not lead us to ignore the ways in which what is traditionally considered the first modern utopia, Thomas More's (2008) work of the same name, was influenced by medieval themes concerned with earthbound salvation, such as desire for a more egalitarian economic and political system.

Thus, Lochrie (2016) shows that it would be a mistake to think about *Utopia* (2008) as representing a clean break with the past, as its modernity might suggest, and that it would instead be more accurate to consider More's work a kind of borderline text balanced

somewhere between the worlds of the Ancients, the Medievals and the Moderns. In terms of More's (2008) modernity, we need not look beyond Raphael Hythloday's relationship to the founder of America, Amerigo Vespucci and the location of his utopian society in some other place on the expanding world map. We would also note More's (2008) famous irony, and his wordplay on the Greek name of his perfect island society, Utopia, meaning simultaneously good place and no place, which lead us to imagine that the founder of the modern genre of utopian literature was perfectly aware that many of Hythloday's observations were a step too far in terms of their potential real-world application. Although we might imagine More to be, similar to the Greeks, a writer focused on the idealism of the 'ought', rather than the modernity of the 'is' advanced by Machiavelli and the modern political philosophers who reached the conclusion that it is pointless to try to model society on the basis of how people should behave when we know full well that this is not how they behave in reality, his irony suggests that he was well aware of the fantastical nature of Utopos' kingdom. On the other hand, however, there are clear connections between More's (2008) utopia and the thinking of the Ancients and particularly the Platonic tradition. More has Hythloday cite Plato several times throughout *Utopia* (2008) and explain that the Utopians are specialists in Greek philosophy. Considering More's vision of utopia, we cannot escape the similarities between the key features of the island's social, political and economic system and Plato's Spartan austere republic.

Akin to Plato's (1991, 2005b) utopia, which was focused on reason, discipline and the control of desire, for Davis (2008), the key principle of More's utopia is one concerned with establishing some form of symmetry between scarce natural resource and infinite human desire. Developing a thesis that responds to the problem of the ontological economy of lack and excess set out in the first section of this article, Davis (2008) paints More's utopia in terms of the social necessity of control, austerity and limitation in a broader context of modernity, early forms of capitalism and a turn towards progress and expansion. Whereas Plato's (1991) fear of excess was rooted in a political psychological theory of what happens when the good society slides through aristocracy, timocracy, oligarchy and democracy until it eventually reaches the worst possible kind of society, the dystopia of tyranny, More (2008) was writing against the backdrop of early modernity and the enclosure of common land. By contrast to the territorial logic of utopia, which in the case of both Plato and More was about limiting geographical expansion in the name of controlling desire and the thirst for superfluity, the problem with the enclosure of land in early capitalism is that it led to the opposite effect by virtue of the way in which space and place became commodities. Writing in this context, More (2008) has Hythloday begin his critique of really existing England by taking up the problem of punishment and the death penalty, which, in his view, is entirely unjust, because it is an effect of inequality and poverty caused by the greed of others. Thrown off common land by the enclosures, the peasants have no way to make ends meet and thus turn to criminality in order to survive.

According to Hythloday, crime is not a problem in utopia, which is carefully managed and organised to reproduce itself and nothing more. In other words, utopia refuses modernity in the name of the primitive form of society that recalls Sahlins' (2017) work on neolithic economics. Similar to Sahlins' history of primitive economy, utopia rejects

the logic of commodification. There is no money on the island. The purpose of this prohibition is, Hythloday explains, to escape the inexorable turn to 'riotous superfluity and dishonest pleasure'. Indeed, far from idolising shiny metals, and leading the contemporary reader to recall the Freudian equation of money and excrement, the utopians regard gold and silver as vile objects, using them to make chamber pots. Thus, Hythloday explains that the citizens of utopia have no time for excess and accumulation, but think about pleasure in terms of health, balance and peace. Similarly recalling Plato's (1991) utopia of reason, order and Pythagorean symmetry, utopia is structured around a kind of philosophical patriarchy. The magistrates run utopia and God is the end of all things. In explaining the logic of this political system rooted in the authority of transcendental law, More has Hythloday warn against hubris, pride and voracious appetite, noting that

she measureth not wealth and prosperity by her own commodities, but by the misery and incommodities of other . . . this hell hound creepeth into men's hearts and pluketh them back from entering the right path of life, and is so deeply rooted in men's breasts, that she cannot be plucked out. (2008, p. 122).

If we look beyond More's (2008) irony, which turns utopia into an elaborate hoax and Hythloday into a peddler of nonsense, the essence of his plan for the best possible world is one founded upon the critique of modernity and the economy of excess that imagines the future through the lens of the past of Platonic/Spartan idealism. In the majority of histories of utopia, the next step in the story of visions of the ideal society takes in revolutionary France, Hegel, Marx and the idea of communism, but in my reading of the development of the utopian form we should first consider the emergence of a very different modern social and political tradition more normally connected to anti-utopian thinking, or, what we might call after David Estlund (2022), utopophobia, primarily because of what this idea of human society would eventually produce.

In this regard, I am referring to the liberal tradition and the thought of Thomas Hobbes (2008), John Locke (2016) and Adam Smith (1982), which would normally be connected to a radical modern break with the utopian tradition of Plato and More because of its anthropological concern with how humans behave in history rather than how they might behave if they could be made to conform to the rule of some transcendental ideal. Although this line through social and political thought up to supporters of the good of late capitalism may appear to be characterised by realism, pragmatism and the management of imperfect social organisation, my argument would be that this thesis misses much of the idealism of the liberal tradition and particularly the elements of this which have survived its transformation into the neoliberalism of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries where the exercise of freedom is centrally focused upon economy (Harvey, 2005). In the case of the arch-realist, Hobbes (2008), who came to the profoundly realistic conclusion that the purpose of society was to lift humanity out of the state of nature to prevent people from destroying each other and little more, it is possible to identify the origins of what would become in Smith (1982), the quasi-theological economic utopia of the invisible hand, and then later in Hayek (2012), the key thinker of neoliberalism, the catallactic system, the vision of spontaneous order and the theory of the mutual adjustment of individual behaviours to market forces, and the late capitalist

cybernetic global economy. When we read Hobbes, it is difficult to trace the outline of what would become the late capitalist utopia of individualism and abstract spontaneous order, but even in the early modern *Leviathan* (2008), it is possible to identify a concern to balance individualism and collective organisation in such a way that would eventually conjure the idea of the cybernetic system that exists somewhere between and beyond individual humans. It is well known that Hobbes (2008) began his critique of the Ancients' philosophical idealism by imagining a state of nature where people would not live very long and the miracle of the emergence of a social contract where they would exchange a portion of their complete freedom for social security under the law of the secular divinity of the monstrous leviathan.

Leaving the violent brutish state of nature behind for the misery of civilisation, Hobbesian man tolerated others in the monarchical system represented by the vision of the big man envisaged on the cover of Hobbes' (2008) classic work, but there was no real sense in which this barely civilised man was properly social. As Piotr Hoffman (1996) explains, the social contract was primarily about self interest and what men desire above all else is power over the other. Given this reality, and the disbelief in the Ancients' notion of the perfectibility of humanity, Hoffman makes the case that Hobbes envisages political society and centrally the economy in terms of a barely civilised struggle or race for power. Under these conditions, and given the broader context of modernity and the emergence of early forms of primitive accumulation and enclosure, Hobbesian man becomes what C. B. Macpherson (2011) writes about in terms of the possessive individual who has to make use of his God-given attributes in order to overcome the other and win the endless race for power. While Locke (2016) would later gloss the brutal reality of enclosure, eviction and estrangement through a fantasy of virgin land, reason, natural rights and the divine mission of settlers to not simply live on the earth, but rather to ensure that it becomes profitable through the exercise of labour, it was left to Adam Smith (1982) to complete the vision of the liberal utopia through the quasi-theological image of the invisible hand, which comes to represent the socially productive coordination of selfish individuals out for themselves in the emergence of a socio-economic system that seems to run itself.

Thus, the liberal utopia of the invisible hand that is simultaneously nowhere, but also everywhere is considered just, because it seems to operate on the basis of divine economic law rather than the word of tyrannical individuals driven by their own passions, and socially good on the basis that the strange coordination of principles of supply and demand will deliver what society needs, wants and decides is valuable. In many respects, my twin track reading of the modern history of utopia, and the failure of the ideal in the image of dystopia, is essentially about the collision of this form of utopianism with the successors of the model of the best society set out by Plato (1991) and More (2008), centrally Marx and Engels (1998b), who opposed the violence of enclosure, estrangement, and the alienation of humans from nature, their creative potential to make worlds, and others who they would otherwise live and work with in productive collaboration. Developing Hegel's dialectics and a messianic vision of revolutionary time, Marx and Engels' idea of the communist utopia at the end of the history thus conceived of the ideal society in ways that recalled the primitivism and spatial and temporal isolation of Plato's Spartan republic and More's austere island community (Engels, 2010; Marx & Engels,

2002). By contrast to this utopia of stability, order and organisation founded upon a recognition of humanity's metabolic relationship to nature, I would make the case that the capitalist vision of the best society was always based upon a notion Paul Virilio (2006) writes about in terms of escape velocity and a theory of the need to overcome humanity's necessary connection to nature through a kind of kinetic idealism that elevated principles of movement, abstraction and change to the position of fundamental social, political, economic and cultural goods. While Marx and Engels (2002) were critical of the violence of the modern society that melted everything solid because of its impact upon human relations with others and the world itself, the capitalist utopians were enamoured by the futurism of their vision of an endlessly progressive kinetic social form.

Contrary to the economic model of Marx and Engels (Engels, 2010; Marx, 1990) that remained bound to labour power and the limited potential of bodies, the capitalist economic vision was founded upon movement and the circulation of commodities in a manner which floated above the world and was in this respect able to develop into what would later appear an infinitely prosperous future. Beyond the emergence of the really existing utopias in the early twentieth century, Soviet Communism and Nazi Germany, which we might similarly connect to the violence of kinetic utopia in respect of the ways in which the development of this form resulted in World War I, the collapse of the old regimes, and economic shocks in the 1920s, I would suggest that it is this capitalist model which should be thought about in terms of the dominant utopia of the modern and post-modern period. While the ghoulish Nazi utopia of racial purity exhausted itself in its drive to exterminate all others in the name of a Hell of the same, I would make the case that the really existing Communist utopia ultimately failed because it was unable to reconcile its promise of a world of equality and prosperity with the reality of what was possible under the planned economy in the twentieth century. In the wake of the initial burst of utopian enthusiasm in the early Soviet period, which we might best capture through reference to Malevich's 1915 painting 'Black Square' that opens out onto the void of the future, the rise of Stalin and the subsequent Stalinist era took a decidedly dystopian turn, famously resulting in the production of key examples of the genre, Koestler's *Darkness at Noon* (2020) and Orwell's *1984* (2004). Under these conditions, the idealism of 1917 was sunk in terror despair, and later stagnation and inertia, and the utopian hopes of the successors of Marx became increasingly theological, apocalyptic and messianic. Indeed, over the course of the twentieth-century, the belief in the really existing Communist utopia waned and was replaced by the messianic utopianism of Benjamin, Bloch and Adorno, who similarly thought that utopia was always on the horizon, not yet, hidden with the explosive events of the now time or contained within the negative that constantly troubles those seeking to assert their own positive vision of the ideal society (Lowy, 1992).

Against this backdrop of the waning of the modern European idea of utopia that seemed fixated upon the resurrection of some primitive Golden Age before the fall, the American liberal individualist utopia of movement, mobility, creativity, innovation and the overcoming of frontiers became a kind of global hegemon. Since the idea of a collective utopia had been reduced to ash in the ovens of Auschwitz, in the wake of World War II, we might say that utopias became individualised, in the sense Adorno and

Horkheimer (1997) wrote about in their work on the fantastical culture industry. Utopia was now no longer about sacrifice in the name of the collective, but rather becoming oneself, making it and consuming to one's heart's desire. Misery and sacrifice were out, pleasure and accumulation became the in thing. Driven into the future by this new model of the good society, the idea of America became about endless becoming. On the basis of this vision, witnessing the end of the Cold War, Fukuyama's (1992) declaration of the end of history and George Bush Senior's vision of the NWO (New World Order), it was easy to imagine that humanity had emerged from a period of ideological conflict into what Jean Baudrillard (2010) wrote about in his work on America in terms of 'utopia realised'. In this post-modern utopia that was no longer somewhere else in some other time but rather *here* and *now*, a heady mix of liberal philosophy concerned with overcoming natural limits, American frontierism and rugged individualism focused upon freedom, and an infinite belief in the power of innovation and technology, came together to present a vision of the future that politicians and political commentators imagined could abolish human want, poverty and misery. This was the high point of the American utopia of global capitalism which was (ironically) already in the process of collapsing in upon itself. In the final section of my article, I explore this recent history of collapse and consider what might come next. My question is, therefore, focused on what comes after the global utopia of late capitalism?

Towards a theory of tragic utopia

In the conclusion of my piece, I propose to explain the slow collapse of the post-modern American utopia realised, the long-term consequences of this process, and the ways in which this suggests the emergence of a new form of ideal society I characterise as a tragic utopia defined by a recognition of human finitude, weakness, vulnerability and co-dependence with others and environmental systems. In this respect, I want to suggest that a tragic, humble, version of utopia founded upon humility, rather than hubris and the desperate attempt to escape from lack, has the potential to short-circuit the economy of utopia set out in the first section of my article. At this point, I want to make the case that the problem of the economy of utopia, and the late capitalist expression of the desire to escape from finitude, is that it has become catastrophic and led to a scenario where every alternative under consideration would appear to need to pass through the kind of messianic utopianism set out by Bloch (2000) and Benjamin (2006) where the emergence of the new is premised on the violent collapse of the old. My thesis is that this is the likely fate of the late capitalist utopia of globalisation, simply because of the ways in which it has produced a situation defined by the radical dissymmetry of the human socio-economic system and the biospheric system that sustains human and other forms of organic life, and that the response to this dire state will have to be the emergence of a new version of the ideal society focused upon a radical understanding and acceptance of limits. As I have sought to show above, the utopias of Plato (1991), More (2008) and Marx and Engels (1998a, 2002) clearly reflect this realisation of the essential finitude of humanity and provide a strong moral case for the imposition of limits upon what has now become a destructive, apocalyptic, addiction to possessive voracious consumer individualism in the late capitalist utopia of freedom and the overcoming of frontiers.

Although it is probably only Marx who, as John Bellamy Foster and his colleagues (2010) have shown, was concentrated on ecological sustainability, simply because neither Plato or More were writing in periods when humans had begun to test of the limits of nature and exploitation, I would argue that the morality of the Ancients and early Moderns provides an important resource for thinking about moving beyond the late capitalist utopia that refuses boundaries. As we have seen above, it is possible to trace the problem with this way of thinking about the relationship between humanity and nature back to the early phase of the liberal utopia, when Hobbes (2008) broke from the Ancients and founded modern political philosophy, which was focused upon realism over idealism (Strauss, 1996). While this vision of Hobbes' modern priority of the real over the ideal has held in the history of social and political theory, the problem with such an account is that it ignores the ways in which the founder of liberalism sought to sever the connection between humanity and nature that was seen to condemn people to a life that was nasty, brutish and short and created a space for the emergence of the limitless utopia of the commodity system that is oblivious to the scarcity of natural resource. It is this problem of over-reach and over-extension that I want to argue has finally exhausted the liberal, neoliberal, capitalist utopia of infinite economic freedom and created the conditions where catastrophic messianism appears key to thinking about the future and the potential for the emergence of an entirely different vision of utopia founded upon limits, finitude and humility.

In this respect, I would make the case that the kind of catastrophic messianism found in the utopian theories of Benjamin (2006), Bloch (2000) and the other Jewish writers of the mid-twentieth century appears ever more realistic because the problem of the late capitalist utopia is not simply one connected to the exhaustion of resources but also concerns a collapse of the radical imagination that might be explained in terms of extreme levels of ideological control and a related failure of thinking otherwise. Thus, we might consider the problem of Baudrillard's (2010) American utopia realised and the ways in which principles of democracy, freedom and liberal individualism have played out across the development of the global communication infrastructure of the internet. In the late 1980s and early 1990s the internet was, it is possible to argue, a key pillar of the liberal/neoliberal capitalist utopia pushing towards globalisation. As Turner (2008) explains in this work on the history of the cyber-utopia, the emergence of the internet in the late twentieth century seemed to offer the possibility of a new horizon, a new technological frontier and new hope for the future. This vision, which very much extended McLuhan's (2001) electric utopia of the global village that had the potential to connect humanity in ways that had never been possible before, centred upon what Barbrook and Cameron (1995) called the Californian ideology of innovation, creativity and individual frontierism. However, the problem with the sunny optimism of the Californian tech utopia of Silicon Valley, which had already been articulated by a range of thinkers concerned with high-tech turn of American capitalism from the mid-twentieth century onwards, is that it quickly became clear that the technological infrastructure underpinning the new utopia of virtual freedom online was one that seemed to work contrary to the possibilities of individualism and social collaboration.

As Herbert Marcuse (2002) and C Wright Mills (2000) explained in the 1950s and 1960s through their critiques of the military-industrial complex and the one-dimensional society, it would be a mistake to imagine that post-industrial technology was somehow

likely to usher in a space of radical freedom and individualism, when the history of sociology and philosophy concerned with understanding the impacts of technology upon humanity tends to suggest otherwise. In the case of the cyber-utopia of the internet, the difference between the bright shiny ideological vision and the reality of the new networked society has become particularly stark. Perhaps, this should not surprise. This is the case because what tends to be missing from popular understandings of the fantasy of the cyber-utopia is the history of cybernetics, behaviourism and the American post-World War II move away from imaginative utopias towards a far more calculative, instrumental approach to thinking about the future of society (Andersson, 2018). While Plato, More and Marx had imagined European utopias, and then leant on versions of the idea of the dialectic in order to think about routes to the delivery of their ideal, in the wake of World War II, the Americans turned towards future studies, instrumental rationality and calculation in order to predict possible futures. While the value of this cybernetic approach to the future appeared to reside in the calculative dimension, which suggested that possible futures could be predicted and delivered with a higher degree of certainty, what I would suggest has become increasingly clear as the cyber-utopia has matured over the course of the early twenty-first century is that the notion that the future can be realised through circuitry, feedback loops and means-end thinking is one that is fatally flawed for two key reasons.

These two key reasons, relating to complexity and the impossibility of the calculation of the future and disenchantment and the crippling of the radical imagination able to think and envisage alternative futures, are perfectly articulated by Shoshana Zuboff in her work on the dystopian fall of the cyber-utopia, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism* (2019), where she presents Max Weber as a kind of prophet of high-tech control, the end of freedom and what she calls inevitibilism. Although Zuboff is not concerned to explain the broader decline of the American idea of the future in this work, I think that the problem of cybernetic inevitibilism is in many respects illustrative of the broader challenge of the late capitalist American utopia, which was, in a sense, understood by Frances Fukuyama (1992) in his work on the end of history. That is to say that upon declaring the triumph of the American social, political, economic and cultural model in the wake of the fall of the Berlin Wall in the late 1980s, Fukuyama realised that the problem for the new American utopia of liberal capitalist democracy would be one of belief, hope and what we might call metaphysical openness. Writing about the end of history in the context of the rise of the American utopia, Fukuyama did not take the problem of the void of belief seriously, but I would suggest that this is precisely what has caused the idea of this version of the (liberal / neoliberal) ideal society to collapse through a series of catastrophes, which have similarly revealed its weakness or bankruptcy relative to reality. Looking backwards, perhaps this is the deeper, metaphysical meaning we might take from the cases of:

- (a) 9/11, where the symbol of American economic power was attacked by terrorists possessed by a very different idea of utopia (Gray, 2008),
- (b) the disastrous attempt to liberate Iraq from the tyranny of Saddam Hussein, which revealed the limits of American power in the ruins and rubble of Baghdad, and sparked the rise of Islamic terrorism in the West,

- (c) the financial crash of 2008, where a utopia of exorbitant debt and endless accumulation crashed upon the rocks of a lack of productivity in the real economy of bodies and work (Featherstone, 2017),
- (d) and finally, Covid-19, when the utopia of frictionless global communication beyond the limits of time and space was laid low by the microscopic virus, the parasite, in ways which recall the logic of Tocqueville's virus able to transform the best possible world into its dark, dystopian mirror image (Featherstone, 2007).

Reflecting upon this catastrophic (recent) history, which has transformed the American utopia of individual freedom and desire into a dystopia of hopelessness and bleak futures, it is clear that humanity must rediscover the utopian imagination on the other side of the neoliberal model of cybernetic capitalism that has produced the current state of exhaustion. In thinking about this condition of exhaustion, in his final works, the late French philosopher Bernard Stiegler (2018) wrote of the problem of the Entropocene, which captures the lack of resource and energy haunting the contemporary capitalist system, and shows how this might be understood through the concept of entropy that describes the tendency of thermodynamic systems to cool towards states of disorganisation, unless they are able to take energy from alternative sources. Given the history of capitalism, extraction, industry and the consumption of fossil fuels, Stiegler's (2018) fusion of the ideas of 'entropy' and 'Anthropocene' seems appropriate to explain the key problem of the present. That is to say the situation in which the utopia of liberal capitalism, founded upon the human desire to achieve escape velocity in order to overcome its own natural finitude, has finally exhausted itself in a nightmarish dystopia of ecological collapse Moore (2016) writes about in terms of the idea of the capitalocene, where the future seems to promise little more than entropic disorganisation, chaos and decline. What is this if it is not a global dystopia?

But if this is dystopia, then what next? In the face of the dark, dystopian, vision of the future, I would suggest that two of the key alternative imaginaries concerned with how society might evolve seem similarly bleak. On the one hand, the populist turns to what Bauman (2017) called *Retrotopia*, and a revival of the primordial utopia of the nation closed off from the wider world, would seem unworkable in a globalised world. We are already hybrids, living with the other and to seek to reject this would seem to point to a vision of society marked by endless conflict. On the other hand, the radical technoscientific suggestions for responding to the exhaustion of planetary resource, including experimentation with microscopic extremophiles, terraforming, and the attempt to escape from the Earth to off-worlds, appear problematic ironically because of their conservatism. Despite their sci-fi veneer, I would follow Mary-Jane Rubenstein's (2022) view set out in her work on the *Astrotopia* and suggest that these extraterrestrial utopias represent more of the same old utopianism of the American frontier that has led us to where we are now. Given this impasse, and the problem of rethinking utopia for the Anthropocene, perhaps we should turn back to Stiegler (2018), who suggests that what is needed today is a vision of a *neganthropocene*, which would move beyond the economy of the utopia of lack and excess by seeking to come to terms with human finitude, weakness, vulnerability and the essential nature of sociability. Thus, the tragic utopia,

the utopia of human limitation, is also an essentially sociological vision of utopia, which breaks with the tradition of human perfectibility found in the early Plato (1991) and that survives in the possessive individualism of the liberal tradition and the capitalist fantasy of the man from nowhere. In this regard, the tragic neganthropocentric utopia is also a Heideggerian eco-topia (see Morton, 2018), which recognises the ontological fact of participation with others and in the world, and understands the necessity of this vision of the future for ensuring, in Gregory Claeys' (2022) words, our survival on a dying planet.


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