

Editorial

Utopian Acts

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Above all, we need to understand utopia as a method rather than a goal ... always suspended between the present and the future, always under revision, at the meeting point of the darkness of the lived moment and the flickering light of a better world, for the moment accessible only through an act of imagination.

Ruth Levitas, *Utopia as Method*¹

Another world is possible.

The activists of the World Social Forum²

We understand utopia as a method rather than a goal. More specifically, we understand it as a method which is currently being enacted by utopian activists across the globe. Utopian acts do not, for us, exist solely in an imagined future. These acts are acts of imagination but they are also acts of protest, resistance, occupation, organisation and solidarity - acts which insist on the possibility of another world in the present. Without such action, utopianism, whether as method or as goal, is rendered unthinkable. Nor would these acts be possible without the 'flickering light of a better world' which a dynamic utopianism offers. This is what the concept of 'utopian acts' offers: a way to bring together scholars and activists who are trying both to imagine *and* to realise that elusive but vital vision of 'a better world'.

By defining activism *as* utopianism in this manner, we deliberately challenge the overriding feeling of dystopian pessimism engendered by this particular moment in global history. Rising income inequality; increasing displacement, insecurity, and precariousness for vast global populations; the lived effects of anthropogenic climate change; and widespread resurgences of populism, white supremacy, and fascism are among the most visible examples

¹ Ruth Levitas, *Utopia as Method: The Imaginary Reconstitution of Society* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 149.

² World Social Forum, "World Social Forum Charter of Principles," 2001, <http://www.universidadepopular.org/site/media/documentos/WSF - charter of Principles.pdf>.

of a contemporary period defined by ongoing crisis. In this historical moment it is easy to exclude utopianism from the conversation around radical action as a naïve, unjustifiably optimistic distraction. However, as activist organisations working tirelessly around the world recognise, to demand a better, more utopian world is, in such circumstances, neither distraction nor escape, but instead forms an ethical and political imperative.

These are the conclusions at which we arrived in the process of imagining, organising, and participating in ‘Utopian Acts’, an event which brought together academics, activists, and artists in 2018 for a day of collective utopian imagining. While utopian studies has a history of engaging with non-academic communities as *research subjects*, we wanted to engage people who primarily work outside of the academy as *fellow researchers*, whose efforts to theorise and put into practice an active model of utopianism parallel, challenge or supplement our own.³ Moreover, further to the event itself, Utopian Acts has fostered a growing interdisciplinary community determined, not just to theorise, but to enact utopianism in the face of precarisation, political disenfranchisement, and the manifold structural injustices which underpin our society.

We see this special issue of *Studies in Arts and Humanities Journal* as an opportunity to extend these conversations into the broader academic community. By presenting the innovative and challenging work of the scholars, artists and activists included in this issue, we seek to intervene in humanities scholarship, centering activism and utopianism as mutually constitutive concepts. We structure the issue as an extended process of opening out: starting with localised micro-instances of utopian action, moving through the utopian representations and political possibilities located in poetic expression, and on to explorations of real-world activist struggles on national and planetary scales. The issue concludes with a call to recognise the possibilities for utopian action offered by our particular political moment, defined in the UK by the feminist activism of Sisters Uncut and Hollaback!, the perpetual crisis of Brexit, and the accelerated privatisation of higher education. In a final utopian gesture, we feature a provocation to those activists and thinkers concerned with the ongoing climate apocalypses which characterise the Anthropocene.

The issue opens with pieces developed and extended from work presented at the Utopian Acts event, which in different ways exemplify the embodied, materialist form of utopianism which lies at the heart of our conceptual project. Amy Butt reflects on her workshop ‘Building Utopia’ in which participants were invited to rearrange the furniture of a university seminar room into “an echo” of the utopian spaces described in a range of feminist science fiction texts. Butt’s piece contextualises these utopian acts in the framework of her own architectural research and practice, before moving to a lyrical description of the workshop itself - weaving together the responses of the participants with her own observations and drawings. She embraces “a model of utopia as method enriched with the recognition of necessary failure, resolutely provisional”. Next Dr. Linda Stupart and Tom Dillon explore the productive relationship between queer theory and utopian imagining. Drawing on texts from Virginia Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse* to the photography of Carrie Mae Weems, Stupart and Dillon focus on the table as a decisively material, potentially utopian object which “can be, and has been, used to build inclusive, progressive, and

³ Two prominent examples of productive academic research of activist communities in the field of utopian studies are: Ruth Levitas, *Utopia as Method*; Davina Cooper, *Everyday Utopias: The Conceptual Life of Promising Spaces* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014).

democratic visions of society". For Stupart and Dillon, the table alternately offers an opportunity to enact conversations, to rebel against the exploitation of reproductive labour or, in the manner of the participants of the 'Building Utopia workshop', to 'turn the tables', and create new, utopian spaces.

The issue then moves to a consideration of utopian poetics, beginning with Sally-Shakti Willow's multi-modal piece 'Writing Utopia Now'. Willow expands the conversation beyond concrete instances of utopian action, by producing a lyrical manifesto which combines the work of utopian theorist Ernst Bloch with a consideration of her own yoga practice. Willow argues that "utopian poetics offers the possibility of a performance, or experience, of non-alienated subjectivity through the text's formal processes". In another consideration of utopian poetics, Mikkel Jorgensen focuses specifically on the poetry of Wendy Trevino, whose writing and activism work to combat the 'cruel fiction' of the Mexican/US border. Locating the utopian potential identified in Willow's manifesto in Trevino's use of the collective "We", Jorgensen advocates for an understanding of utopianism which "finds significance in crisis and becomes the vocabulary of the revolutionaries and the suppressed people".

The next three pieces in the issue explore historical instances of utopian activism from the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Francis Tarpey-Brown chooses as case studies the 2013 Gezi Park protests in Istanbul and the wave of anti-government demonstrations they inspired; and the Aboriginal Tent Embassy in Canberra, Australia, a de-colonising occupation by the nation's indigenous inhabitants. These instances of resistance, argues Tarpey-Brown, are "cracks through the consistency" of the "homogenous empty time" of late capitalism, impossible moments containing "more than one world in a single world". Alba Garmendia and Haritz Azurmendi extend a utopian critical approach to what they call "Basque '68", the wave of cultural nationalism in the Basque community emanating as a response to the oppressions of the Francoist dictatorship. The cultural output of this fervent period in Basque history is read as not only a representation of nationalist struggles but their prefiguration, a "conglomerate of memories, hopes and anticipations ... in-between the historical community and the not yet utopia". Lúcia Helena Ribas returns us to the contemporary moment with a forceful celebration of the #EleNao (#NotHim) feminist movement founded in opposition to the candidacy of now-president of Brazil, Jair Bolsonaro. Contextualising the demonstrations in the long history of Latin American feminist movements, Ribas argues that #EleNao has transcended its original oppositional stance and has become "something more positively directed and nurturing of democracy itself".

Molly Ackhurst's piece 'Everyday Moments of Disruption: Navigating Towards Utopia' opens the final set of articles, which seek to demonstrate that utopian action is not only a contemporary, but a local concern. Building on the legacy of feminist activism discussed by Ribas, Ackhurst considers the work of Sisters Uncut, Hollaback! and the Silenced Museum as UK organisations which have revolutionised feminist discourse surrounding sexual violence. An active participant in these organisations herself, Ackhurst draws on the utopian imaginings of Octavia Butler, adrienne maree brown and Walidah Imarisha in her efforts to explore how contemporary feminist activists offer "new and radical directions for engaging with, and feeling our way towards, utopia". Meanwhile, Professor Susan Bruce's timely piece explores the "cacophony of utopias" which have emerged around the idea of Europe in recent years. She examines the ways in which participants on all sides of Brexit use and misuse utopian texts, particularly Thomas More's orinary *Utopia*. Bruce's incisive reading of the two very different Books of *Utopia* demonstrates that, far from promoting an Arcadian English isolationism, More's text evokes an "open-ended, dialogic, outward-looking cosmopolitanism" which would serve humanity well in the current

reactionary political climate. Heather McKnight then brings the question of utopian activism into the university itself. She draws attention to the 2018 University and College Union strikes, in particular to the songs, picket lines and acts of radical solidarity between staff and students which took place at the University of Sussex. Like Ackhurst, McKnight writes as both activist and researcher. She argues that “the act of writing” about such activism must “take on a necessarily resistant form for the critical utopian researcher”.

The issue concludes with a provocation and a plea to critics to take up a critical utopian framework in relation to anthropogenic climate change. Sheryl Medlicott dismisses the dystopian outlook which dominates current ecocritical efforts both within and outside of the academy. She instead posits a utopian methodology which combines the work of Ruth Levitas and ecological critic Timothy Morton, and concludes that identifying *existing* utopianisms is not enough in our pursuit of better worlds. As she puts it: “Where a text fails to suggest a better way of being this should be part of our critique of that text”.

Among the most rewarding of the lessons we have learnt in editing this issue has been that when we adopt a critical framework in which utopianism is always considered in relation to oppositional political action, we must necessarily confront the bleakest, darkest, and cruellest enemies of utopianism. The work on Bolsonaro, sexual violence and the militarisation of borders collected here makes clear the fact that utopian acts are not limited to the passionate attempts to create generative and secure utopian spaces which we both imagined and witnessed at the Utopian Acts event. Often, outside of the safety of the intellectual worlds within which many of us are fortunate enough to work, utopian action looks like resistance, defence, and desperation. These real-world utopian acts are not always named as such, and some of the most incisive and valuable work of utopian activist research - a field in which much work must still be done - involves the excavation of these obscured, but vital, utopian impulses. In the anti-Fascism of the Basque peoples, the resolute self-determination of aboriginal activists and the struggles of feminists, from Britain to Brazil, we see the flicker of utopian worlds.

Produced for and by scholars, artists and activists, this issue encourages its readers to reimagine what utopianism might mean, to connect scholarship with both artistic creation and activist praxis and, most importantly, to create better worlds. As Ibtisam Ahmed wrote in response to the Utopian Acts event: “Utopia needs to be appreciated and experienced in moments, sometimes conflicting, sometimes incomplete, but always present. Engage with the now. Dream of a not-yet. And in doing so, shape the future”.⁴

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⁴ Ibtisam Ahmed, Twitter post, 2 September 2018, <https://twitter.com/Ibzor/status/1035927252654063616>.