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A Provocation to Practice Utopianism in the Face of Climate Crisis

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Abstract

This short piece explores the radical potential of utopia to imagine alternative futures from within the context of environmental crisis. It presents utopia as an ecological practice that offers the potential to reimagine the relationship between humanity and nature as we face up to climate crisis. It challenges ecocritics and other scholars to produce academic output that is both environmentally-minded and utopian, that is to say alive to the innumerable possibilities of other ways of being.

Keywords: Utopia; Climate change; Ecology; Environmental crisis; Ecocriticism; Ecological Thought; Timothy Morton; Ruth Levitas

In my academic work I seek to bring together thinking from utopian studies and ecocriticism to explore the relevance of utopian theory and literature to how we respond to climate change. Taking a utopian approach to climate change is, however, controversial. Most environmentally-minded people are keen to stress the grave consequences of our current ways of being and worry that any hint of hope is irresponsible; I have even once been told the idea is morally repugnant. As a consequence, we are surrounded by profoundly dystopian stories about climate change in fiction and in the media.

These dystopian stories are not as radical as they may first seem. They largely presume that in the face of everything we do not change. We still live in private homes, have private cars, work in offices, exercise in gyms and shop in supermarkets as the waters rise around us. These commentators expose flaws in a system that is still presumed to be all-prevailing. This is why their visions are unrelentingly bleak, and more depressant than stimulant. And this is exactly why, instead of dystopianism, I advocate utopianism as a radical and effective approach to mediating climate change.

So, what does an environmental utopianism look like? Traditionally, utopias are a blueprint for a model society, demonstrating the supremacy of the author's ideas for arranging society and critiquing contemporary laws, politics, economics and social norms. An environmental utopia in this style may well consist of a community living within planetary limits, minimising their consumption, recycling, using renewable energy and so on. But while these are likely factors in achieving a more sustainable society, the top-down imposition of these standards would require state control at a level tantamount to totalitarianism. This is also unlikely to be considered an ecological practice as I shall explain further.

A big potential stumbling block to being both utopian and ecologically aware is that acting with utopian intent requires one to assume a clear position of authority. This is incompatible with a movement away from dominating and controlling others, both human and non-human, within ecocritical thinking. In ecocriticism the expectation that we cannot presume to exert control over others and our environment comes from a profound alteration in how we consider humanity in relation to other elements of nature. Timothy Morton, author of *The Ecological Thought*, visualises the relationship between all subjects within our ecology as a mesh, with no hierarchical order. His vision is one of strange strangers enmeshed together who all act upon each other; there is no top, bottom or edge. Within the mesh, humans do not have a central position from which to issue directives or define how we perceive and interact with other elements of nature.[1] Once we see ourselves as within the mesh, the relationship between being ecological and being utopian is complicated. This is a difficult position for a traditional utopian to act from, as it removes the platform and the capacity to act.

So, having discounted as ecologically-not-credible the idea of imposing a certain way of being upon others, what *does* an environmental utopianism look like? Utopian thinking has in fact moved beyond attempts to envisage and impose a certain improved society, and its strength is now in fostering the utopian imagination and the ability to think differently. Utopianism is an imaginative practice that thinks beyond the constraints of prevailing ideologies to true alternative visions. As such, utopia offers the potential to reimagine the relationship between humanity and nature when reconsidering the ideal conditions for the flourishing of both.

Sociologist Ruth Levitas in her book *Utopia as Method* proposes an ontological approach to utopia. Traditional blueprint-style utopias are in essence teleological as they propose an end point which, if achieved, would result in the perfect society. The ontological mode of utopia places emphasis instead on ways of being, and the conditions that enable one to thrive. It is the act of continually asking whether the current conditions are those most conducive to human flourishing and, if not, imagining better ways of being. Due to its continual nature, this kind of utopianism is a process and not an end goal. It entails a responsibility for perceiving problems and addressing shortfalls, but not imposing an overarching grand scheme.[2]

As a sociologist, Levitas focuses on human society, and through ecocritical eyes her focus on human flourishing may seem anthropocentric and as such unecological. However, her own definition of the ontological mode as 'concerned precisely with the subjects and agents of utopia, the selves interpellated within it, that utopia encourages or allows', contains nothing that precludes this approach from also encompassing non-human subjects, agents and selves.[3] Even her description of the conditions in which we are most human does not necessarily exclude the non-human other. She states:

> We are therefore most distinctively human not as 'I' but as 'you and I' in a mutual relationship of recognition of the other who is not treated as a means to an end. Only in such a pure relationship, which assumes agency, responsibility and choice on the part of self and other, is a genuine meeting of persons possible.[4]

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[1] Timothy Morton, *The Ecological Thought* (Cambridge, Mass.; London: Harvard University Press, 2010)

[2] Ruth Levitas, *Utopia as Method: The Imaginary Reconstitution of Utopia* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013)

[3] Levitas, *Utopia as Method*, xvii

[4] Ibid., 187

The emphasis on interconnectedness recalls Morton's ecological thought, which also sees humans as inextricably connected with others, although notably he would explicitly extend this to non-human persons.

It is key to both Levitas and Morton that relationships between selves within society (in Levitas' case) or ecology (in Morton's) do not assume reciprocity. This an idea for which they have a common source in Emmanuel Levinas. Levitas notes that,

> For Levinas, the other… is radically unknowable, and a relationship conceived as one of communion or sympathy wrongly reduces this radical otherness to sameness. The ethical relation to the other stems from insurmountable difference and is not reciprocal. It entails a responsibility for the other which cannot be demanded in return, which is unconditional – a sort of ethic of grace.[5]

This unconditional responsibility or 'grace' represents a secular guiding principle for our interaction with others, which enables us to act in a way that is in our best interests as socially-embedded creatures rather than simply being self-interested.

For Morton, the radical unknowability of the others we commune with is paramount. Part of thinking ecologically is being aware of the strangeness to us of the other participants in our ecosystem and the complexity of our mutual interactions. Acknowledging our interconnectedness with other lifeforms does not make us close to them in a cuddly sort of way. We do not choose to become intimate with our ecological connections; rather, we find that ecology is something in which we are already subsumed and which we barely understand. Morton writes:

> The strange stranger is at the limit of our imagining. … Even if biology knew all the species on Earth, we would still encounter them as strange strangers, because of the inner logic of knowledge. The more you know about something, the stranger it grows.[6]

A cognisance of this dark, uncanny side of ecology is essential to ecological thought. The ultimate aim, however, is not dissimilar to Levitas' understanding of utopianism – we should act as selves enmeshed with many others and not consider ourselves separate and apart. Nor should we consider our own needs as primary.

Bringing together these ideas from utopian studies and ecocriticism reveals this area of overlap, where the ontological mode of utopia can be reconciled with ecological thought. The ontological mode of utopia, then, *is* a kind of embedded, ecological practice. Having demonstrated this, I want to stress again the importance of utopianism for ecocriticism, which in my experience is prone to despair about environmental crisis.

If climate change is on our minds, which it should be, it will affect our reading of texts. Academia is one of the places where we push thought forward and addressing climate change should be part of our academic output. This output should also be utopian, by which I mean it should be alive to the possibilities of other ways of being and champion texts that foster the utopian imagination. I suggest the application of utopia in its ontological mode within ecocriticism is in examining which narratives, genres and forms explore our relationship with others, both human and non-human, and the conditions in which we might thrive rather than portraying our inevitable demise. Where a text fails to suggest a better way of being this should be part of our critique of that text.

In his introduction to Verso's 2016 edition of Thomas More's *Utopia*, the fantasy writer China Miève says 'We should utopia as hard as we can. Along with a fulfilled humanity we should

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[5] Ibid., 187

[6] Morton, *The Ecological Thought*, 17

imagine flying islands, self-constituting coraline neighbourhoods, photosynthesising cars bred from biospliced bone-marrow. Big Rock Candy Mountains. Because we'll never mistake those dreams for blueprints'.[7] I sincerely hope that ecocritics (and others) might go forth as climate change utopians, keeping alive the possibility of innumerably various alternative futures and demanding the impossible.

References

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