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Some varieties of utopian method

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Abstract

This article opens with H.G. Wells's assertion that utopia is the distinctive and proper method of sociology. It outlines four ways of thinking about utopia which imply different methods, distinguishing a hermeneutic method from the imaginary reconstitution of society. The author finds common ground with Wright in exploring and endorsing the role of utopia, utopias and utopianism in transforming capitalism into something better. But this article focuses on two areas of difference: Wright's reliance on extrapolation from prefigurative practices, and the state–economy–civil society model that underpins Wright's work. It argues that we should take imagination and the imaginary reconstitution of society more seriously as tools in the struggle for social transformation.

Key words: utopian method, sociology, reality, imagination, social transformation

In 1906 H.G. Wells addressed the newly minted Sociological Society in London on the subject of the 'so-called science' of sociology. He declared that 'the creation of Utopias – and their exhaustive criticism' was the 'proper and distinctive method' of the new discipline (Wells 1906: 367). Since Wells was at this time angling for a Chair in sociology at the London School of Economics, this should be read as something more than a provocation (Levitas 2010). Moreover, when the first Chair was created two years later, it was expected to be filled by Patrick Geddes rather than its actual incumbent Leonard Trelawney Hobhouse. Geddes was also enthusiastic about eutopia, if not utopia: he saw utopia or outopia as unrealistic, while eutopia was 'the good place as it can be made here and now if we set our minds to the task' (Branford 2010: 69. See also Branford and Geddes 2010; Goldman 2007; Savage 2007; Scott and Husbands 2007; Studholme 2007, 2008). The Canadian sociologist Lewis

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Mumford took the same position. His book, *The Story of Utopias,* is perhaps the last really positive engagement between sociology and utopia for many decades (Mumford 1923).[1] Sociology claimed respectability on the basis of science, and, in keeping with a general discursive polarisation between science and utopia, rejected its utopian affinities. By the time Ralf Dahrendorf wrote his famous critique of functionalist sociology under the title 'Out of Utopia', it was unexceptional to present utopia in entirely negative terms (Dahrendorf 1958). I argue in *Utopia as Method: The Imaginary Reconstitution of Society* that Wells was right – if not that utopia is *the* proper method of sociology, but certainly that it is *a* proper method. *Utopia as Method* suggests two such methods. Erik Olin Wright's *Envisioning Real Utopias* offers a third. In this article, I outline my own approach and then draw out some of the differences between myself and Wright, or at least some questions that are generated by the dialogic relation between our arguments (Wright 2010; Levitas 2013).

Much rests on the meaning of the term utopia itself, so it is useful to distinguish four different ways of thinking about this. First, utopia can be understood as the expression of the desire for a better way of living or of being. This is a broad definition, which I used in *The Concept of Utopia*. It builds on the work of the German Marxist philosopher Ernst Bloch, whose 3-volume work *The Principle of Hope*, written largely in the 1930s and published in the 1950s, is the most extensive treatment of the subject of utopia (Bloch 1986). This corresponds to a wide category of *utopianism* which is recognised in one form or another by all the leading writers working in the field of utopian studies. Still focusing on desire as the core of utopia, it has also been suggested that the primary function of utopia is the education of desire, the development of 'authentic' wants and desires, usually oriented away from consumer satisfactions. This mode of thinking about utopia is, I think, implicit in the idea of human flourishing itself. What are we as human beings? What do we really want and desire? What does and will make us deeply happy? Such existential questions are unavoidable and fundamental to the utopian quest.

Secondly, utopia may be understood as an irrelevant fantasy or as a malevolent nightmare leading to totalitarianism. New generations are inducted into the view that utopia is dangerously escapist through popular children's literature. In *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*, Harry spends two nights gazing at his lost family in the Mirror of Erised, around which runs the inscription 'Erised stra ehru oyt ube cafru oyt on wohsi' (I show not your face but your heart's desire). On the third night, Professor Dumbledore intercepts Harry, and tells him that the Mirror of Erised 'shows us nothing more or less than the deepest desires, most desperate desire of our hearts … However, this mirror will give us neither knowledge or truth. Men have wasted away before it, entranced by what they have seen, or been driven mad, not knowing if what it shows is real or even possible.' The mirror will be removed and hidden, and Dumbledore counsels Harry 'It does not do to dwell on dreams and forget to live' (Rowling 1997: 152,

157). The idea that utopia is actually dystopia, that it implies a nightmare, is expressed elsewhere in popular culture, as in the 2013 British television series *Utopia*, a violent, unpleasant and very male fantasy of the future. A version of this anti-utopian orientation can also be found in much writing about architecture, which equates utopia with failed modernism – a view which has been strenuously countered by Nathaniel Coleman (Coleman 2005).

Third, there is a whole range of social practices which might be seen as prefigurative of a better society. Some of these are the kinds of innovative institution-building that Wright identifies as 'real utopias', so there is more to be said on this point. But there are all sorts of ways in which social practices may prefigure the kinds of social relations that we hope would characterise a better society; not all of them quite fit Wright's model.

Fourth, we can think about utopia as a more holistic outline of an alternative society, leaning towards greater systemic and institutional specificity, and thus constituting a more sociological model, which is what Wells had in mind. Such descriptions may take the form of novels, travellers' tales, political programmes or works of political theory. Typically, literary utopias embed a contrast with the present to which they stand as critique, give some account of the causes of the ills of contemporary society and therefore some account of how these can be rectified. They may or may not specify a process of transition and identify the agents of change.

These different ways of thinking about utopia give rise to different methods. I am concerned here not with the invention of methods, but the naming, recognition and endorsement of methods that are already in play. Thus the definition of utopia as the expression of desire implies something diffused through culture, and detectable in the visual arts, in music, in religion, in literature. Bloch also noted its presence in everyday practices of making ourselves otherwise through dress, or attempts to alter our bodies and characters to conform to some ideal. And, as Bloch was well aware, not all such practices are radical or socially transformative: often the wishes of the weak are only those that the powerful wish them to have. But identifying and scrutinising such wishes – whether our own or other people's – means unearthing them from their cultural forms. So the 'utopian method' in play here is primarily hermeneutic, or interpretative. *Utopia as Method* explores this through the utopian resonances of the colour blue, and the different ways in which music is held to be utopian. The aesthetic dimension is important because it is the primary secular vehicle of exploring the existential dimension of life, what it means to be human and how we experience ourselves in the world. The quality of experience uncovered or recovered can be thought of through both secular and religious ideas of grace.

If such expressions of desire are fundamental to utopian longings, their translation into ideas of and hopes for a transformed society necessarily take you to the fourth way of thinking about utopia, an outline of a better society, expressed in specific institutional terms. The method here is one of the imaginary

reconstitution of society. If we construe sociology as an attempt to understand society as an integrated system – albeit one riven with tensions and contradictions – then this kind of utopian imagining can be seen as a kind of speculative sociology, a sociology of a potential future. Such accounts of society otherwise frequently, if not usually, contain descriptions of the generating present, partly as a foil for the posited better world, but also as an explanation of how current social processes work and mechanisms of change: in that sense, they embed a sociology of the present as well as of the future. And in so far as sociology itself has a critical edge on the actually existing world, it too contains (though often also represses) a hope for and image of the world transformed, an implicit utopia.

Such a method has three aspects: an archaeological mode, an ontological mode and an architectural mode. The archaeological mode is close to a sociological form of critique, and indeed is the method Wright uses in his critique of capitalism, although he does not name it as such. It involves unearthing the image of a good society that is embedded in particular political programmes, actual processes or cultural expressions of utopia, and subjecting these to, as Wells put it, exhaustive critique. This often involves contrasting what is explicitly or implicitly said to operate (such as the free market) with another picture of reality (the free market is sustained by legal regulation and results in widespread harm). The archaeological mode recognises that all accounts are partial, sometimes but not always wilfully so, and it brings the resultant absences into focus for the purpose of scrutiny and judgement. The ontological mode both forms part of this and points forward to an alternative. It is concerned with the subjects and agents that make up society as it is imagined – the kinds of selves that live in this world. Are we, for example, imagined as the selfish, competitive people supposed by classical economics, always out to maximise perceived utility, or are we imagined as at least potentially altruistic, co-operative and even kind? Are these imagined characteristics attributed to genetically determined 'nature', or seen as partially or wholly mutable and socially determined? And these questions of course relate to utopia as architecture, society imagined otherwise, not just in abstract terms of justice or equality, but in terms of the alternative social institutions that would deliver these goods. For ideas of what kind of society might be good for us and make us happy depend very much on the ideas of human flourishing embedded in the questions of desire with which this article began.

The point of thinking about utopia as a method rather than a goal is threefold. First, it is a more accurate portrayal of what most utopian writers intend. One of the consequences of modernity is the recognition of contingency, and therefore both the dependence of our own thinking on our social location, and the historical flux that means the future will never turn out as we expect. To think of utopia as a plan for the future runs counter to the existential consequences of modernity (see Berman 1983).[2] Second, it helps resist the anti-utopian argument

that utopia is incipiently totalitarian. Third, it reaffirms utopia as part of a process of imagining necessarily bound up with political resistance and change, a collective act of trying to remake the future through imagination and praxis.

Both utopia as a hermeneutic method and utopia as the imaginary reconstitution of society as I discuss them in *Utopia as Method* differ from the approach taken in Wright's *Envisioning Real Utopias*. But all three methods can be seen as part of a tentative re-engagement of sociology with utopia that has taken place over the last decade. Wright's recent Presidency of the American Sociological Association, the consequent devotion of the 2012 ASA Annual Conference to the theme of 'Real Utopias', and the publication of *Envisioning Real Utopias* itself have done more than anything else to push forward this rapprochement. And if we differ in how we go about this, both of us have the same objective: to break down the barriers between sociology and utopia, to encourage sociological engagement with possible futures, to draw on the disciplinary knowledge and skills of sociology to address the multiple crises of the contemporary world. We are both, I think, exploring and endorsing the role of utopia, utopias, and utopianism in transforming capitalism into something more conducive to human flourishing. Here, I want to explore two areas of difference: first, the reliance on prefigurative practices and second, the state–economy–civil society model that is the basis of Wright's imaginary reconstitution of pasts, present and potential futures.

Wright's approach is developed out of Marxism, and in the context of the 'Real Utopias' project at Wisconsin. He describes it as emancipatory social science: 'the word *emancipatory* identifies a central moral purpose in the production of knowledge – the elimination of oppression and the creation of the conditions for human flourishing. And the word *social* implies the belief that human emancipation depends upon the transformation of the social world, not just the inner life of persons' (Wright 2010: 10). This is both archaeology and ontology. But critique of the present must be combined with exploring institutionally specific alternatives that are desirable, viable and achievable. The 'real utopias' to which Wright appeals are actually existing institutional experiments, alternative practices that can be seen to work. Examples include participatory city budgeting, unconditional basic income, workers co-operatives (including those at Mondragon), and Wikipedia – forms of prefigurative practice.

My reservations about arguing from such experimental institutional forms are threefold. They concern the limited notion of the 'real' as a qualifier of 'utopia'; the question of scale; and the related question of partial rather than holistic imagined alternatives. 'Real utopia' is presented by Wright as a deliberate contradiction, or at least extreme tension. Utopia is assumed to be fundamentally unrealistic: 'Utopias are fantasies, morally inspired designs for social life unconstrained by realistic considerations of human psychology and social feasibility. Realists eschew such fantasies. What we need are hard-nosed proposals for pragmatically improving our institutions. Instead of indulging in

utopian dreams we must accommodate to practical realities' (Wright 2010: 5–6). Utopia is dangerous, for 'vague utopian fantasies may lead us astray, encouraging us to embark on trips that have no real destinations at all, or, worse still, which lead us to some unforeseen abyss' (Wright 2010: 6). The need is for alternative institutional designs rather than abstract principles. The 'real utopias' that Wright calls for entail the 'fundamental redesign of different arenas of social institutions' and not 'general, abstract formulations of grand designs' (Wright 2010: x). Wright's argument is developed without reference either to utopian texts or utopian commentary and theorising. Reading this literature suggests both that it is full of alternative institutional designs and that the provisionality of these is well understood by both utopian writers and scholars. These imagined alternatives are, however, not real in Wright's sense. They actually exist only between the covers of books and in the imagination. While Wright endorses the role of the social imaginary in constructing possibility, he nonetheless reserves the term 'real' for actually existing social practices.

There is much in the scholarly literature, both on utopia and on sociology, that would suggest this to be an overly literal and limited notion of the real. Emile Durkheim argued that social facts are real if they are real in their effects. The social imaginary, which includes versions of how the social world actually works as well as how it might be otherwise, might therefore be designated real. Angelika Bammer therefore seeks to 'counter the notion of the utopian as unreal with the proposition that utopia is powerfully real' (Bammer 1991: 7). Writers like Ernst Bloch and Roberto Unger include in the real possible futures that are not yet in existence. Walter Benjamin and Slavoj Zizek include also the futures that were historically possible, but that were displaced by the actually existing course of social processes. They too are still active elements in the social imaginary. That the easiest way to think of such historical futures is as unrealised possibilities illustrated just how slippery the term 'real' actually is. The appeal to the real immediately provokes the question of which reality, whose reality, and what are the politics of particular versions of the real. As Paolo Freire put it, '[r]eality as it is thought does not correspond to the reality being lived objectively, but rather to the reality in which the alienated man imagines himself to be' (Friere 1972: 14).

For Wright, the need for 'real utopias' arises from the need for visions of an alternative social order and the constraints of present conditions. We are of course constrained, both in what it is possible for us to imagine, and in what it is possible for us to imagine as possible. But to treat only that which has been tested by the criterion of actual existence as real, or really possible, is overly restrictive. It is also counter-productive. One corollary of the argument from actually existing experimental forms is that only those that are viable within the parameters of the existing wider system (of global capitalism) can be admitted. Such alternatives are therefore also always partial rather than holistic. Wright thus rules out, in relation to the future, one of the great virtues of the utopian

(and sociological) approach, namely the ability to explore how different spheres interact at the institutional level. But such a move is necessary from the perspective of 'real utopias' themselves, for the potential translation of institutional experiments into the building blocks of an alternative future entails considering the consequences of scaling up such practices, and their relation, at different scales, with the wider existing and potential society. Both sociology and utopia are essentially systemic. Any imagined change provokes the question, what needs to change for this to be possible? For example, what needs to change for child poverty to be eliminated rather than merely alleviated? What needs to change for genuine equality between men and women? What needs to change for us to live peaceably within ecological limits? While prefigurative practices may help us here, they are not our only resource, and they operate as resources only when they are imagined as part of a larger, transformed totality.

Wright does indeed think in terms of such a totality, which is construed in terms of economy, state and civil society. I have reservations about this approach as well, especially its capacity to incorporate a broad view of economic activity that includes economic activity outside the formal labour market, its capacity therefore to deal with gender inequalities, and its capacity to address environmental limits. Here, I am using the archaeological mode of utopia as method as a critique of Wright's analysis. He defines capitalism as 'an economic structure within which economic activity is controlled through the exercise of economic power'. Statism is 'an economic structure within which economic activity is controlled through the exercise of state power. State officials control the investment process and production through some sort of state-administrative mechanism'. Socialism is 'an economic structure within which economic activity is controlled through the exercise of social power. This is equivalent to saying that the economy is democratic' (Wright 2010: 12). Although this is actually about forms of power controlling economic activity, these do map onto an imagined version of society that looks at the world in terms of economy, state and civil society.

This is, as feminists have persistently argued, very problematic. I contend that there is no such thing as 'the economy'. There is only social activity looked at from its economic aspect. If we are going to consider 'economic activity', we must, as Miriam Glucksman says, consider the Total Social Organisation of Labour (Glucksman, 1995). Feminist work over the last fifty years (and before) has demonstrated just how much socially necessary work takes place outside the formal economy, and outside the market. That involves all the unpaid care of children, older people and people of working age – what Marxist feminists used to call the limited and extended reproduction of labour power. That means all the necessary work of enabling people to get up and go to work the next day, as well as the work involved in making new people fitted to the society / economy into which they are born. Developing human capital, the economists call it. It leaves out care of those who are too old, or in other ways unable to work.

The point is, then, that economic work takes place both within the marketised sphere generally referred to as 'the economy'; through the state, not only as investment decisions but through public services, healthcare and education – that very welfare state that is being dismantled before our eyes; and in the 'residual' realm of the social. What is actually happening as public sector jobs are either outsourced to private companies or abolished entirely is that more and more work is pushed back across the market / non-market boundary and either won't happen at all or will be carried out unpaid, disproportionately by women. The 'democratisation' of economic activity, in this sense, can only be brought about by the 'democratisation' of the whole society. But I'm not sure what that means, and I think the objective of socialism has always been to achieve what William Morris called equality of condition.[3]

Wright's argument is quite anti-statist, in common with most contemporary discourse. The privileging of the 'social' is rather like the general assumption of the moral superiority of civil society or the third sector. But social power, or power within civil society, is not necessarily democratic. Moreover equality of condition, not to mention living within environmental limits, is likely to entail quite a lot of 'statist' activity and decision-making. It is difficult to imagine Wright's real utopia of basic income being scaled up other than at the level of the state. Forms of self-organisation like co-operatives intrinsically depend on legislative frameworks sustained by the state – as do the current depredations of global capitalism in the so-called free market. The failure of some real utopias similarly results from such legislative frameworks. The nineteenth-century Owenite community at Ralahine in County Clare was actually quite successful until the landowner lost his title to the land in a Dublin gambling den (Geoghegan 1991). The tenants had no security of tenure under the law and were evicted. I am inclined here to reach for the concept of interests, which would be one way of bringing in the criterion of equality and not assuming that social power is democratic, or that democracy necessarily produces good outcomes. The key issue is how 'the state', or whatever local, national and supranational institutions characterise our utopian future, can be made accountable and act in the interests of the common good for existing and future generations. We still have to work out how this may be possible.

The utopian method set out in *Envisioning Real Utopias* emphasises the usefulness of prefigurative practices as institutional models for an alternative future. This has always been part of the utopian repertoire, especially in the large body of work on intentional communities. But the utopian potential of such practices depends on how we read them, whether and how we imagine them scaled up, and how we imagine them generalised within an imagined totality. Wright is reluctant to admit such speculative holism, arguing from the old disciplinary caution that Wells challenged a century ago. As social scientists, says Wright, we have inadequate knowledge to posit holistic alternatives. Real utopias must be both viable and achievable, and we just don't 'know' enough

about the project or process of transformation: 'our capacity to generate scientifically credible knowledge about social conditions beyond the near future is very limited' (Wright 2010: 28). 'Science' then limits the utopian hypothesis, binding 'real' or 'viable' utopias closely to the present. This mode of argument blocks off any imaginary reconstitution of society that cannot claim legitimacy as existing accepted 'scientific' knowledge. It privileges 'science' over imagination, and fails to recognise that the very imagination of holistic systems and the interrelations of existing or alternative structures and processes itself generates understanding of the social world, or put more simply, knowledge. We should indeed pay attention to the prefigurative and alternative practices which surround us. But we should also take imagination and the imaginary reconstitution of society seriously as tools in the struggle for social transformation.

Notes

1 Mannheim defines utopia in a way that explicitly excludes the imagination of alternative worlds (Mannheim 1936). See Levitas (2011, Chapter 3).
2 For the consequences of this existential shift for utopian literature in the context of the politics of the 1960s and 1970s, see Tom Moylan (2014).
3 See William Morris, 'What Socialists want', www.marxists.org/archive/morris/works/1887/want.htm; William Morris, 'How I became a Socialist', www.marxists.org/archive/morris/works/1894/hibs/index.htm, accessed 9 July 2014. See also discussions in Levitas (2011, Chapter 5; 2013, Chapter 10 and 2005).

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