



Looking laterally: The literary utopia and the task of critical social theory

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Abstract

This article is focused on exploring the value of literary utopias for social theory. The literary utopia, at first glance, appears irrelevant to sociology, its imaginative descriptions of social worlds both radically different and substantively better than our own seeming to skip over the central task of sociological enquiry: the diagnosis of society as it exists. In this article, the author aims to demonstrate that this is mistaken: the tradition of literary utopianising has much to contribute to sociology. Utopian authors, from Thomas More in the sixteenth century to Ursula K Le Guin in the twentieth, have developed a sophisticated and original mode of social critique. The utopian text, in bricolating and remixing aspects of actually existing society, creates something both new and astonishing. In looking laterally at the world from the perspective of utopia, consciousness of the contradictions and repressions of the dominant relations in contemporary society is sharpened. The literary utopia achieves this in two ways: first, it demonstrates how the not yet realised norms of the author's society can be fulfilled and, second, it discloses the hidden possibilities for new ways of living that are present but denied in the social world.

Keywords

Critical theory, ideology, literature, possibility, utopia

It is common in pieces on the relationship between utopia and sociology to begin with a lament. There was a possibility, at some point deep in the origins of sociology as a discipline, for the formation of a utopian sociology, something best captured by great science fiction writer and would-be social scientist HG Wells's declaration in 1906 that 'the

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creation of Utopias – and their exhaustive criticism – is the proper and distinctive method of sociology’ (1906: 367). The tentative hope expressed by Wells for a sociology that has one eye on the liberated future of humanity was quickly quashed. The arrayed forces of positivism, scientism and value neutrality led sociology down a quite different path, such that the documentation of society as it currently exists has overshadowed the articulation of hopeful visions of new worlds (Dawson, 2016; Levitas, 2013). Yet, the break between sociology and utopia has never been complete; a subterranean tradition of scholars has formulated a sociology informed by the utopian impulse. Karl Mannheim’s (1936) excavation of the utopian mentality in social movements is an obvious example here. One can also think of Zygmunt Bauman’s (1976) account of socialism as the active utopia of modernity, critically recuperating the value of utopian socialism from the scepticism of liberalism and Marxism alike. In recent years, the Wellsian injunction to imagine new worlds has been taken up by Ruth Levitas (2013) and Erik Olin Wright (2012), each scholar formulating a set of utopian demands that, if implemented, would produce radically better social worlds.

Perhaps, then, the lament for the lost encounter between utopia and sociology is not entirely justified; the desire for a better world has found a home within the discipline. However, a concern can be raised here: there are certain forms of utopianism that are more comfortably accommodated within sociology than others. Levitas’s claim, on the occasion of the 500th anniversary of the publication of Thomas More’s *Utopia*, is particularly interesting in this context: ‘*Utopia* does not matter very much. Utopia does. . . . Utopia is in its best sense a speculative sociology embedded in transformative politics that is the very precondition of our survival’ (Levitas, 2016: 400). In itself, the claim that More’s *Utopia* is of little importance today for the task of generating speculative sociology is uncontroversial. After all, what book published in the sixteenth century is still used in sociology? Nevertheless, this attitude does betoken a certain suspicion of the literary genre of utopia inaugurated by More, or fictional texts focused on the detailed description of a non-existent socio-political world that is organised on ‘a more perfect principle than in the author’s community’ (Suvin, 1988: 35). As the discussion of the relationship between sociology and utopia above indicates, where sociology has shown an interest in utopia, it is non-literary visions of new societies that are the focus. This might be the utopian impulse in social movements – from the restored paradise hoped for by chiliastic peasant movements in the Middle Ages to the modern labour movement’s dream of socialism – as analysed by Mannheim and Bauman. Or, alternatively, the transformative-yet-realizable demands and institutions – including unconditional basic income, participatory budgeting and worker-owned cooperatives – advocated by Levitas and Wright. However, the literary tradition of utopianising, the most famous examples of which are More’s *Utopia* (1516), Edward Bellamy’s *Looking Backward: 2000–1887* (1888) and Ursula K Le Guin’s *The Dispossessed* (1974), has been kept at some distance from sociological accounts of utopia. Borrowing Wright’s (2012) language, the literary manifestations of the utopian impulse appear not quite real enough, with the outlandish schemes and absurd speculations of utopian authors insufficiently grounded in the world as it exists.

It is easy to see why there might be a distance between literary utopianism and sociology. There is a disciplinary divide at stake here. A gap, but not an unbridgeable chasm, established itself between sociology and literature at the beginning of the twentieth

century (Lepenies, 1988).¹ Too much cross-fertilisation between literature and sociology, it is feared, might undercut the legitimacy of the latter; the fantasies and illusions of novelists are incompatible with empirical social science. This problem is compounded by the particular nature of the literary utopia, which *intensifies* the creative power of the individual writer: it is not only plots and characters that are imagined, but whole new worlds. There is no guarantee, as Marx and Engels comment of the utopian socialists, that the vision offered will be anything other than the fruit of the ‘personal inventive action’ of its author, entirely unconnected to prevailing social tendencies or the hopes already operating in the world (2010: 515). By concerning themselves with the latter phenomena – immanent possibilities for betterment or the expressed desires of social movements – sociologists are on much safer ground, with the utopian ideas in question rooted in actually existing society. However, we might question this dismissal of the literary utopia. As the sociology of literature testifies – with its focus on questions of the production, dissemination and reception of literature – novels cannot be abstracted from the social conditions in which they emerge; even the most idiosyncratic utopian vision tells us something about the society in which it was written. Less banally, it is possible to understand literary texts as a kind of non-mimetic sociology, with certain forms of social insight fostered by fictional modes of writing that the standard forms of sociology (the treatise, article, monograph, manifesto and so on) struggle to express (Misztal, 2016; Váňa, 2020; Watson, 2016).

The aim of this article, in one sense, is to recuperate the sociological potential of the literary utopia. However, there is a need to make this aim more specific, not least because it would be wrong to say that there has been a complete side-lining of the literary utopia in sociological accounts of utopianism. Levitas (2013) has been attentive to the sociological importance of the *fin de siècle* resurgence of the literary utopia, with Bellamy’s *Looking Backward*, William Morris’s *News from Nowhere* (1890) and HG Wells’s *A Modern Utopia* (1905) said to bring immanent social possibilities for a better world to the fore. One could also point to the work of Krishan Kumar (1987) and Lisa Garforth (2017), both of whom draw on speculative texts to offer sociologically-informed assessments of utopia. Furthermore, a number of prominent twentieth-century sociologists have turned to speculative fiction. WEB Du Bois’s ‘The Comet’ (1920) and Raymond Williams’s *The Volunteers* (1978) and *The Fight for Manod* (1979) are particularly interesting examples here (Milner, 2016; Zamalin, 2019). The literary utopia is one of the forms through which the impulse toward a better world is expressed in sociological terms. To adapt Levitas’s earlier statement, More’s *Utopia* does matter, but only insofar that it is a form of utopianism, partaking in and encouraging the diffuse desire for a liberated world. This does, however, prompt questions: Does *Utopia* matter insofar that it inaugurates a specific mode of writing about society? Is there anything distinctive about the form of the literary utopia that should make it of particular interest to sociologists?

Given this, my article is focused on addressing two questions. First, what contribution does the literary utopia as a form make to sociology? Second, is this contribution in any way distinct from that of non-literary modes of utopianising? To address these questions, this article demonstrates that there is an idiosyncratic form of critique at work in the literary utopia. Drawing on the critical theory tradition of social thought and a diverse range of literary utopias – from More’s genre-inaugurating *Utopia* to Charlotte Perkins

Gilman's classic feminist utopia *Herland* (1915) and Touré's African-American utopia *Soul City* (2004) – I argue that utopian texts perform an *internal* critique on the society from which they emerge. The utopian author takes familiar aspects of present society and, by placing them in a new context, cultivates a critical understanding of the old society, demonstrating its failures, contradictions and repressions. The literary utopia achieves this in two ways: first, it demonstrates how the not yet realised norms of the author's society can be fulfilled and, second, it discloses the hidden possibilities for new ways of living that are present but denied in the contemporary world. By comparing the literary form of utopia to both, on the one hand, conventional, non-utopian forms of social theory and, on the other, non-literary modes of utopianism, I identify what is valuable about the form of critique developed by utopian authors in their fictional constructions of new socio-political worlds.

Social theory of other societies

From this brief discussion of the literary utopia, we already have some idea of its essential features. However, in order to consider the relationship between social theory and utopian texts, it is worth giving a more precise definition of the genre. First, a utopian text is concerned with describing a 'quasi-human community' and, as such, supernatural phenomena, things that are impossible within the world, though occasionally present in utopias, are not their primary focus (Suvin, 1988: 35). This requirement demarcates the literary utopia from other modes of imagining a good place – the limitless abundance of the Land of Cockayne, the eternal bliss of heaven, the harmony of the primordial Golden Age – that involve a fantastical imaginative element, either at the level of content or motivation (Davis, 1981). The side-lining of supernatural phenomena helps to locate the distinctive focus of utopia as a literary genre. Utopias imagine different and better *socio-political worlds*, foregrounding the institutions, mores and practices of the societies described. In the typical utopia, the reader is offered a guided tour of the forms of life that operate in the new world imagined by the author, with elaborate descriptions of economic, governmental, familial and cultural arrangements presented.

With the side-lining of supernatural phenomena and its description of socio-political structures, the literary utopia, in one sense, places us in the world as it currently exists. What, then, differentiates utopias from novels focused on socio-political issues in the contemporary world, the paradigmatic example being Charles Dickens's *Hard Times* (1854)? The literary utopia, in contrast to naturalistic fiction, constructs a society that is both radically other and significantly better than the world of the author's present. This is the 'more perfect principle' identified by Darko Suvin, which effects an 'estrangement' from society as it exists (1988: 35). The otherness of the literary utopia has an important effect: utopian fiction is concerned with social relations that are unfamiliar to author and reader. In contrast to naturalistic fiction, the *setting* of the utopia cannot be taken for granted; the socio-political world of the text becomes the object of explicit concern, often at the expense of character and plot. Utopias, lacking strong narratives and complex characters, are often unsatisfactory when judged by the standards of naturalistic fiction (Kumar, 1987). However, when the literary utopia is judged according to criteria emerging from its own form – that is to say, the power of the new society imagined,

whether as a satiric commentary on the present or a desirable possibility for the future – then it ceases to be deficient. As Fredric Jameson emphasises, the utopia ‘does not tell a story at all’ but instead ‘describes a mechanism or even a kind of machine’, with the formal capacities of non-utopian fiction (plot, character and so on) deployed only insofar that they help to elaborate another world (1994: 66).²

The literary utopia, placed between fantastical and naturalistic fiction, has the character of a ‘serious game’ (Ruyer, 1950: 4).³ There are certain rules that govern the attempt to imagine a new society, understood both negatively – there are phenomena it cannot foreground – and positively – it must present us with a socio-political world other than our own. With these two criteria in hand, it is possible to turn to the affinity between the literary utopia and social theory. In Charles Taylor’s terms, social theory begins with the question of ‘what is really going on?’, working to explicate in systematic and coherent terms the functioning, structures and relations that define the world (1985: 92). The literary utopia is also concerned with this question, offering a detailed analysis of the totality of relations that define the imaginative society in question, with Levitas commenting that utopias are ‘incipiently sociological’ insofar that they offer an ‘integrated whole’ of ‘social institutions and practices’ (2013: 75). More specifically, the key issue at stake in the literary utopia is also one of the central questions of social theory: ‘What is social order?’ (Joas and Knöbl, 2009: 18). Order, in the broadest possible terms, refers to ‘how individual units, of whatever motivation, are arranged in nonrandom social patterns’, with society organised according to a determinate shape (Alexander, 1982: 92). If the task of the social theorist is to *discern and describe* this order, then the task of the utopian author is to *construct and describe* an order; both are concerned with comprehending a set of elements as a social whole.

The literary utopia offers a totality of social relations, with the society imagined posited as a closed, coherent world (Jameson, 2005; Ruyer, 1950). The practice of developing a utopian vision involves some of the same moves as the game of social theory. This is obvious in More’s *Utopia* when we read: ‘I am wholly convinced that unless private property is entirely abolished, there can be no fair or just distribution of goods, nor can the business of mortals be conducted happily’ (More, 2002: 38). This statement implies that More’s vision is underpinned by an implicit social theory. Two points should be stressed here. First, developing a vision of another world implies some general account of what is important socially speaking; a claim is needed regarding what determines the overall shape of a particular social order. In *Utopia*, it is property relations that are fundamental; the entire order of a social world can be understood in terms of the presence or absence of property. Now, of course, there is no consensus in the corpus of literary utopias on the determining force in society. Feminist utopias, such as Gilman’s *Herland*, pinpoint gender relations as the key structuring relation, while for anti-racist utopias, such as Du Bois’s ‘The Comet’, it is racism. Indeed, there is no need to identify one relation, with Le Guin’s *The Dispossessed* offering an account of society in terms of a set of intersecting economic, governmental and environmental concerns. Whatever the specifics of the account, however, there is clearly a generalisable social theory at stake, with an attempt made to determine the forces that shape all social orders, whether utopian or non-utopian, that might exist.

Second, the quotation from More’s *Utopia* suggests that the question of social order also involves an attempt to understand society as a whole. Property relations are the lens through

which all other aspects of ‘the business of mortals’ are understood (More, 2002: 38). It is here where the focus on everyday life in utopian society comes to the fore, with the abolition of property reflected and reinforced by a host of other quotidian relations in the new society. For example, the reader is informed that even the design of houses in Utopia is shaped by the absence of property relations: ‘The double doors, which open easily with a push of the hand and close again automatically, which let anyone come in – so there is nothing private anywhere’ (More, 2002: 46). There is an account of relations of causality in the society in question, with the key structuring relation of property relations determining secondary matters such as design. Not all utopias are monocausal, with some visions of new worlds implying a multicausal account of society. Again, Le Guin’s *The Dispossessed* is a good example, with the society described existing in the tension between the drive to equality in economic relations and the drive to centralisation impelled by the spartan environmental conditions of its geographical location, the two forces equally responsible for the shape of the social order presented. In any case, as in social theory more generally, the construction of a utopian society involves the attempt to articulate the part and the whole, with society posited as a structured pattern of relationships.

The claim, thus far, is obvious: literary utopias and social theory have an affinity insofar that they are both centrally concerned with the task of explicating the order of society. However, when we consider the relationship between literary utopias, social theory and society as it actually exists, matters become more complex. There is a very big proviso on saying that the literary utopia is a form of social theory: whereas the latter is focused on what actually exists, the former is focused on what does not exist. If one of the requirements of social theory is that it ‘show us the real, hitherto unidentified course of events’, rendering explicit and comprehensible the basic structures of *actually existing society*, it is unclear how literary utopias can count as social theories (Taylor, 1985: 94). Instead, the literary utopia, at least on the surface, does something quite different, offering us an ideal theory of the world that is entirely abstracted from the current state of society. The utopian society appears to offer a critique from an Archimedean standpoint, such that the author is positioned outside and above the social world. The tension between non-ideal and ideal theory, which is something very familiar to political philosophers, is the key dividing line between social theory and the literary utopia: sociology is underpinned by realism, while utopianism is motivated by a drive to idealism (see Thaler, 2018). Given this, is the literary utopia indelibly ‘utopian’ in the bad sense, implying a transcendental standard of critique that is positioned over and above the society addressed? And, if so, are we dealing with normative political theory rather than a form of sociology? Or, is there an alternative, internal form of critique in operation in the literary utopia, with the imaginary construction of a new world immanently related to the practices and structures of the society of the author? In Gustav Landauer’s (2010) terms, what is the connection between the *utopia*, the vision of a new society, and the *topia*, the contained and delimited social context from which it emerges?

The literary utopia as critical social theory

To address these questions, we should turn to a constitutive tension of the literary utopia. The utopian text is reliant on what Suvin (1988) calls a *novum*, with the society advanced

other to that of the author's experience. One of the requirements of the literary utopia is that the world it imagines is different and better, and radically so. Yet, this drive to novelty is checked; there is a barrier to elaborating a society that is entirely new, the vision of utopia is shaped by the topos in which it is elaborated. As Jameson comments, all 'images of Utopia . . . will be ideological' insofar that their authors are caught within the horizons of expectation of their time, such that the image of the new is defined by its 'inescapable situatedness: situatedness in class, race and gender, in nationality, in history' (2005: 170–171). The phenomenologically rich image of a different social order is grounded in the situation of the author, taking up elements of social experience and representing them in utopian terms. This does not mean, however, that the literary utopia offers nothing more than a reflection on the situation of the author; the demand for novelty exerts a pull on social experience. What emerges from the tension between the inescapability of the old and the drive to the new is a process of 'bricolating and combining' whereby elements of the contemporary social world are taken up and brought together in new ways to produce a 'representational picture' (Jameson, 2005: 29). The society imagined is formed through bits and pieces of the society of the present; the odds and ends of the contemporary moment, once brought together in an alternative form, produce an image of a new world. The 'utopian exercise', in this way, involves a 'break with the habitual combinations', first fragmenting the social world and then rebuilding it again (Ruyer, 1950: 17). The literary utopia allows for almost complete freedom in the act of recombining elements of the social fabric to produce another world, such that the utopian does not 'invent anything genuinely new, but clarifies, purifies the old through games of reflection and inversion' (Wunenburger, 1999: 146).

The utopian method of reworking the 'raw material' of the author's world to produce a novel form of order offers a clue as to how the literary utopia functions as a kind of internal, rather than external, critique (Jameson, 2005: 14). Rather than attempting to construct an ideal social order that lacks any relationship to the world as it exists, the literary utopia reworks the historical situation of the author, rendering actually existing society in new ways for the reader.⁴ As Raymond Geuss comments of internal critique more generally, the literary utopia is committed to the idea that 'if the proponents of a critical theory wish to enlighten and emancipate a group of agents, they must find in the experience, form of consciousness, and belief of those agents the means of emancipation and enlightenment' (1981: 65). The aim of utopia, understood as an internal critical procedure, is to develop a standard that is both derived from already existing society but, at the same time, has the potential to fundamentally transform the world from which it emerges. What is interesting about the internal procedure is that it implies both '*analysis* and *critique*', such that the aim is 'to criticize a state of affairs by analyzing it' (Jaeggi, 2009: 65). There can be no split between the analysis of the world as it actually exists and the image of a new, better society by which it is criticised. However, while the idea that the literary utopia takes up and transforms the raw material of the social world might be accurate as a description of the utopian method, it remains vague. That is to say, the presentation thus far leaves some important questions open. For instance, what exactly is the raw material that the literary utopia draws on? And, furthermore, what is distinctive about the way in which the literary utopia treats this material, as compared to critical social theory more generally?

We can begin to consider these issues by turning to the question of ideology critique. One of the key raw materials for the construction of a utopia are the values circulating in the 'prevailing moral culture' of the author; the creative recuperation of already existing normative claims provides an impetus to imagine new worlds (Honneth, 2009: 44). *Utopia* is a good example in this context, and in particular the dialogue that opens the first book of More's text. This dialogue is focused on the problems of English society in the sixteenth century, with the cruelty of executing thieves and the inefficiency of the economy centre stage. What is significant, however, is that all participants in the dialogue agree that commonwealths should be 'just and prosperous', even as they disagree on the particular nature of English society (More, 2002: 37). These values, it is implied, are already circulating in sixteenth-century society, at least amongst the Renaissance humanists of More's circle. The hope, then, is that a society constructed on the basis of justice and prosperity will resonate with the moral culture of More's contemporaries. At the same time, More's invocation of justice and prosperity has a critical function, suggesting the ideological role of these values in English society. The basic claim of ideology critique is the non-identity between the dominant values of the society in question and actual relations in this society. As Theodor Adorno puts it, ideology critique 'takes seriously the principle that it is not ideology in itself which is untrue but rather its pretension to correspond to reality' (1981: 32). To return to More's *Utopia*, despite the shared commitment to justice and prosperity, it is also clear that English society has failed to realise them: a world where thieves are executed and the people are poor is neither just nor prosperous. The utopian vision elaborated in the second book of the text is aimed at demonstrating that justice and prosperity not only have not been realised in England but, moreover, cannot be realised while property exists.

Justice and prosperity offer situationally-specific standards of critique, with the vision of *Utopia* arising out of the shared moral culture of sixteenth-century England and, at the same time, demonstrating how this moral culture contains the seeds of an alternative world within it. Yet, is the *positive* vision of utopia, the image of communism elaborated by More in the second book, really necessary? It might be argued that it is sufficient to simply point out the non-identity between the shared normative values and their non-realisation in actually existing society. A *negativistic* critique is what is at stake in the first book of *Utopia*, with the analysis of feudal English society in the light of the principles of justice and prosperity revealing the problems of the former and the promises of the latter. From the perspective of ideology critique, the vision of communism in the second book might appear gratuitous; it confirms but does not extend the criticism elaborated in the first book. To respond to this challenge, it should be stated that ideology critique is not purely negative; there is a sense in which the conflict between values and society results in the transformation of both. As Rahel Jaeggi notes, ideology critique 'not only criticizes a deficient reality according to a standard of norms, but also vice versa', meaning that contemporary society 'requires a *transformation of both reality and the norms*' (2009: 76, italics in the original). A role for the positive content of utopia becomes evident: the new society imagined by the author offers an image of this process of mutual change, demonstrating a world where the old, familiar norms take on new, unfamiliar content by virtue of their position in a transformed society. Literary utopias both express and subvert our situatedness within the ideological horizons of our time,

taking up the norms circulating within society but also excavating new meaning from these norms.

Gilman's feminist utopia *Herland*, originally published in serialised form in 1915, offers a particularly clear example of this, with the following exchange demonstrating the interplay between the norm and the reality, the old and the new. We are told that in contemporary American society 'Human Brotherhood' – one of the three classic bourgeois liberal values, alongside equality and liberty – is a 'great idea' but 'far from a practical expression' (Gilman, 1979: 66). Like More's *Utopia*, there is a consensus on normative values but, at the same time, solidarity has not been fully realised, with social divisions rendering it an ideological proposition. However, as a feminist, Gilman is also concerned with the patriarchal implications of understanding solidarity as brotherhood. The society of *Herland* posits a different norm of social solidarity: 'Here we have Human Motherhood – in full working use' (Gilman, 1979: 66). On the one hand, motherhood realises the latent promise of brotherhood, with the egalitarian and harmonious social order of *Herland* allowing for a sense of community impossible in actually existing society. On the other hand, motherhood changes the norm of solidarity, imbuing it with new content: 'The children in this country are the one center and focus of all our thoughts. . . . You see, we are *mothers*' (Gilman, 1979: 66). The shift from brotherhood to motherhood entangles solidarity with an ethic of care, such that the feminist utopia is held together by a rich affective sense of the needs of others.

Literary utopias demonstrate the unrealised normative content of actually existing society, looking in two directions at once: both back to the society of old and forward to the new world. There is, however, a second raw material that is drawn on by utopian authors for this task: possibilities. The literary utopia, as Nikolas Kompridis comments of critical social theory more generally, is a 'possibility-disclosing practice', aimed at keeping 'the possibility of a different future open, resisting resignation and accommodation to what is' (2006: 263). One of the characteristic effects of ideology is to render the dominant societal structures at any given time natural and eternal, such that historically contingent social phenomena are made to appear unchangeable. The task of what Seyla Benhabib calls defetishising critique is to challenge this sense of historical necessity and inevitability, demonstrating that contemporary social relations are 'not a natural fact but a socially and historically constituted, and thus changeable, reality' (1986: 47). Utopian texts engage in defetishising critique insofar that they demonstrate that there are other ways of living. In Suvin's terms, the utopian world is 'an *analogy* to unrealized possibilities in the addressee's or implied reader's empirical world' (1988: 37). The author proposes a socio-political world that 'without transcendental support or intervention' has succeeded in organising itself in a new way, thus demonstrating that there is something contingent about social relations in actually existing society (Suvin, 1988: 34). Utopia plays with the boundaries of the necessary and contingent, with part of its task to demarcate those aspects of human life that are eternal and those aspects that are changeable.

The result is what Miguel Abensour famously called the 'education of desire', that is to say, 'the point is not for Utopia . . . to assign "true" or "just" goals to desire but rather to educate desire, to stimulate it, to awaken it' (1999: 145). In demonstrating that things can be otherwise, the repressed possibilities circulating in society are released. One of the key ways in which this is achieved is through a confrontation between the congealed

expectations of actually existing society and everyday life in utopia. This technique is used to great effect in Morris's *News from Nowhere*. The narrator Guest, who travels from the nineteenth century to a communist England of the future, applies capitalistic expectations to the world of Nowhere and discovers that these expectations are irrelevant and unreliable in a communist society. For example, Guest comments to his guide Dick, while being taken through the streets of a transformed London, that he has not observed any 'poor people' in the streets (Morris, 1892: 35). Dick is unable to properly comprehend the comment, responding that: 'No, naturally; if anybody is poorly, he is likely to be within doors' (Morris, 1892: 35). In Nowhere, the idea that one might observe poverty in the streets is absurd and almost inconceivable; all have enough to live comfortably. Through Guest's 'blunder' of confusing the old and the new, the contingency of the expectations formed in the nineteenth century is revealed: there is no necessity to the presence of poverty, it is the fruit of a particular set of historical relationships (Morris, 1892: 200).

However, in a similar fashion to the doubts about ideology critique expressed above, we might question whether the positivity of the utopian form is strictly necessary. In particular, is it not possible to practise defetishising critique not by looking to imaginary other worlds, but instead to the history of our own world? For Benhabib (1986), Marx's critique of political economy, which demonstrates that the claims of political economists are specific to capitalist society rather than economic life as a whole, is the paradigmatic example of defetishising critique. This historical account is, in one sense, more convincing than the literary utopia: whereas Marx relies on verifiable historical evidence in his defetishising method, the literary utopia is seemingly predicated on nothing more than the author's own imagination. What, then, does the literary utopia add to defetishising critique? To address this, it is worth turning to Raymond Ruyer's claim that the utopian method is a '*mental exercise in lateral possibilities*', aiming to recuperate 'the possibilities that it sees overflowing from the real' (1950: 9, italics in the original). The emphasis on possibilities suggests that literary utopias are aimed at social alternatives that are implicit but unrealised in actually existing society. What is at stake in the literary utopia is not the backward-looking task of determining how society has come to be what it is, as in the historical form of defetishising critique, but instead on the forward-looking task of inventing what society could be in the future.

Looking Backward: 2000–1887, Edward Bellamy's phenomenally successful utopia first published in 1888, is particularly interesting in this context. At the centre of Bellamy's utopia is the 'industrial army', a social institution that conscripts all people aged between 21 and 45 to produce the goods and services needed for the nation's well-being (2007: 39). Bellamy, in recasting economic life as an act of military service, builds on latent possibilities in nineteenth-century American society. The institution of the army offers a model for the organisation of society as a whole. The discipline of the military is a way to avoid the wastefulness and inefficiency of capitalism, therefore minimising unemployment, reducing worktime and allowing for the egalitarian distribution of labour. Furthermore, the sense of patriotism evoked by the military is harnessed by the industrial army, such that there is a 'duty of every citizen to contribute his quota of industrial or intellectual services' (2007: 37). Bellamy takes the familiar military mode of organisation and brings it into the unexpected realm of the economy, thus demonstrating

the latent possibilities of a certain aspect of already existing society. Via the practice of rearranging and remixing social institutions and practices, hidden and undervalued aspects of the social world are brought to the fore.

Touré's satirical utopia *Soul City*, published in 2004, offers a more recent example of this defetishising practice. The text is focused on a separatist African-American city where politics is organised in a very distinctive manner. The mayoral elections of the city are contested by political parties formed around particular genres of black music, with the ballot consisting of 'the Jazz Party's Coltrane Jones, the Hiphop Nation's Willie Bobo, and the Soul Music Party's Cool Spreadlove', each party with its own set of political proposals drawn out from the culture and style of the music scene it is named after (Touré, 2004: 13). The political history of *Soul City* tracks the musical styles dominant in African-American life, with gospel and blues giving way to jazz in the 1940s, soul dominating in the 1960s, funk and disco in the 1970s, and hip hop in the 1990s. The distinctive logic of black politics, as scholars from Du Bois (1903) to Paul Gilroy (2002) have discussed, is often expressed in musical form. By eliding politics and culture – presenting a culture war in the best sense of the phrase – Touré exaggerates the political implications of black music but, in doing so, the utopia clarifies and redeems them, showing how black politics might be expressed in a world freed from racism. *Soul City* renders contingent our own mode of doing politics and suggests that there are other models lying just under the surface of the contemporary world.

Utopia, literary and otherwise

On this basis, the value of the literary utopia from the perspective of critical social theory is clear. Utopian texts, at their best, present a specific form of internal critique, demonstrating what it might mean for the unfulfilled values of actually existing society to be fully realised and highlighting the repressed possibilities for a better world residing within familiar social relations. This twin focus on norms and possibilities allows us to return to the question of the significance of the literary utopia as compared to other forms of utopianism. Now, in one sense, the non-literary utopias discussed in the introduction can be seen to play a similar critical role to the literary utopia. The utopian visions articulated by social movements and the utopian demands formulated by social theorists such as Levitas and Wright also operate on the norms and possibilities already present in society. Social movements very often point to tensions in the moral culture of contemporary society to advance their causes, while demands such as universal basic income and participatory budgeting are justified as a means of deepening equality, freedom and democracy. In a similar fashion, both movements and theorists point to immanent, futural possibilities within the contemporary world to legitimise their utopian demands. The classic example here being the Marxist idea that the productive power of capitalism makes socialism not simply an ideal but a material possibility.

In this context, what is distinctive about the literary form of utopia? Two points should be stressed here. First, in terms of norms, the literary utopia has an advantage over non-literary forms of utopia in terms of ideology critique: its rich descriptions of everyday life in utopia. Rather than offering an abstract set of demands, the literary utopia gives some sense of what it would mean to live in a liberated society, offering 'a fully developed and

detailed picture of the happy world that is expected to result from the application of particular principles' (Kumar, 2003: 70). One of the consequences of this is that the literary utopia gives a sense of what it would mean to live in a non-ideological society, or a world where the leading normative values of the society align with its practices and institutions. Morris's *News from Nowhere* is interesting in this context. Quite by chance, Guest, having found himself in a transformed England, finds a guide in the waterman Dick. Despite lacking any specialist knowledge of the society in question, Dick is able to orient Guest, acting as the latter's 'showman of our new world' in the text (Morris, 1892: 14). The everydayness of social theory in utopian societies, the fact that Dick's 'spontaneous sociology' needs no problematisation or correction, implies that the world imagined by Morris is one without ideology; no critical 'break with primary representations' is required (Bourdieu, 1989: 18). The social relations that govern the world are transparent; there is no contradiction between norm and existence, the world is one where the relationship between values and social relations is clear to all. It is this alignment that allows for the egalitarian distribution of social theorising in the new society. To return to Taylor's question, the common sense of utopia gets to the root of what is really going on.

Second, the possibilities involved in non-literary utopias are governed by certain negative boundaries. As Wright (2012) outlines, social alternatives proposed should be viable and achievable; there is a need to demonstrate the sustainability of the new institution or practice advanced and address how it is possible to move from current society to the future world posited. These questions of viability and achievability are clearly key for non-literary forms of utopia; both social movements and critical theorists, to be convincing, must address the practicality of their utopian visions. By contrast, the literary utopia is freed from these constrictions. There is no requirement for the utopian author to address the viability or achievability of their visions. The raw material of the social world appears as 'infinitely open to recombination' to the literary utopian (Holquist, 1968: 119). We can return to Bellamy's *Looking Backward* and Touré's *Soul City* here. It is far from clear whether it is practical, or even desirable, to reconstruct the economy on the model of the military or politics on the model of cultural production, but this is not the point. Bellamy and Touré are able to remix the social world and, in the process, demonstrate its openness and contingency without concern for questions of practicality. The literary utopia encourages an 'exchange of fantasy', piquing and provoking its readers to follow the author in the process of the exploration of new worlds (Abensour, 1999: 138). The task of the utopian writer, then, is not to model realisable visions of the future but to open up the coordinates of the present through surprising combinations. The fruit of the literary utopia is not a realisable political programme but more utopia, or a greater awareness of the full set of social possibilities inherent in the present.

Where does this leave us? The literary utopia is a fecund-yet-underutilised resource for critical social theory, offering us a creative, intriguing and productive form of internal critique. Even non-literary utopian forms, for all their strengths, cannot quite touch the playful interaction between invention and critique that defines the literary manifestation of utopia. The lament for the lost encounter between sociology and utopia with which this article opened is still justified: there is much to learn from literary utopias. However, perhaps alongside this feeling of mourning, there should be one of humility. Literary utopias represent a rich stream of social theory but one which has developed largely in

isolation from formal sociology. We have, of course, known about the ‘sociological imagination’ that circulates in society for a long time (Mills, 2000: 5). However, what the literary utopia offers is something more than a diffuse sense of imagination, a watered-down sociology formed from the crumbs left by academia. Instead, it presents a sophisticated operation of critique predicated on the tension between the raw material of the old and the desire for the new, taking up elements of the contemporary world to draw forth its hidden hopefulness. All of this suggests a need for the broadening of horizons; we should look beyond the established canons and forms of sociology for new insights from surprising, and even uncomfortable, sources. The utopian method should infuse sociology itself: What critical resources and hidden possibilities are there at the corners of our intellectual universe that might have the capacity to transform how we do sociology?

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Notes

1. As AH Halsey (2004) traces in the British context, there have been flashes of a rapprochement between literature and sociology, most famously the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at the University of Birmingham.
2. These formal features of plot and character should not be completely dismissed. For instance, Tom Moylan suggests ‘the primacy of societal alternative over character and plot is reversed’ in the ‘critical’ utopias of the 1970s (2014: 44). Shevek, the protagonist of Le Guin’s *The Dispossessed*, is a more complex character than the one-dimensional tourist of older utopias. He experiences profound change as he moves between the utopia of Anarres and the non-utopia of Urras. Nevertheless, even here, a description of the unfamiliar world is required. *The Dispossessed*, like the other utopias discussed, must still paint a picture of the social relations of Anarres.
3. All translations from material cited in French in the references are my own.
4. The entwining of utopia and topia prompts a question: Are utopias of the past only relevant for the societies from which they emerge? My sense is that utopias of the past can have relevance beyond the moment in which they were written, but only insofar that we share something of the social experience of the author. For example, a utopia directed against inequality in a particular society will retain a hold in other societies that also experience inequality (see Davidson, 2019).

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Author biography

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Résumé

Cet article cherche à explorer la valeur des utopies littéraires pour la théorie sociale. A priori, l’utopie littéraire ne semble pas présenter d’intérêt pour la sociologie, ses descriptions imaginaires de mondes sociaux à la fois radicalement différents et substantiellement meilleurs que le nôtre semblant faire l’impasse sur ce qui constitue la mission principale de la recherche sociologique : le diagnostic de la société telle qu’elle existe. Cet article a pour objectif de démontrer qu’il s’agit là d’une erreur, et que la tradition de l’utopie littéraire a au contraire beaucoup à apporter à la sociologie. Les auteurs utopiques, de Thomas More au XVI^e siècle à Ursula K Le Guin au XX^e siècle, ont développé un mode original et sophistiqué de critique sociale. Le texte utopique, en « bricolant » et « remixant » des aspects de la société existante, crée quelque chose qui est à la fois nouveau et extraordinaire. Si l’on regarde latéralement le monde du point de vue de l’utopie, la conscience des contradictions et des répressions présentes dans les relations dominantes au sein de la société contemporaine s’en trouve aiguisée. L’utopie littéraire y parvient de deux manières : premièrement, en démontrant comment les normes encore irréalisées de la société imaginée par l’auteur peuvent être respectées et, deuxièmement, en révélant les possibilités cachées de nouvelles manières de vivre qui sont présentes mais pas reconnues dans le monde social.

Mots-clés

Idéologie, littérature, possibilité, théorie critique, utopie

Resumen

Este artículo se centra en explorar el valor de las utopías literarias para la teoría social. La utopía literaria, a primera vista, parece irrelevante para la sociología. Sus descripciones imaginativas de mundos sociales radicalmente diferentes y sustancialmente mejores que el nuestro parecen saltarse la tarea central de la investigación sociológica: el diagnóstico de la sociedad tal como existe. En este artículo se pretende demostrar que esto es un error: la tradición de la utopía literaria tiene mucho que aportar a la sociología. Autores utópicos, desde Thomas More en el siglo XVI hasta Ursula K Le Guin en el siglo XX, han desarrollado un modo sofisticado y original de crítica social. El texto utópico, al combinar y mezclar aspectos de la sociedad realmente existente, crea algo nuevo y asombroso. Al mirar lateralmente al mundo desde la perspectiva de la utopía, se agudiza la conciencia de las contradicciones y represiones en las relaciones dominantes en la sociedad contemporánea. La utopía literaria logra esto de dos maneras: primero, demostrando cómo las normas aún no realizadas de la sociedad imaginada por el autor se pueden cumplir y, segundo, revelando las posibilidades ocultas de nuevas formas de vida que están presentes pero negadas en el mundo social.

Palabras clave

Ideología, literatura, posibilidad, teoría crítica, utopía