

Imagination in capitalism

The Contemporary Utopian Spectrum

“The real, the possible, and the political are all joined at the hip. It is precisely because other possibles have been turned into ‘impossibles’ that we find it so difficult to imagine other realities.” *Arturo Escobar (2020, 3)*

By Heather Alberro

Leading theorists such as Ruth Levitas (2010) tend to identify utopianism with a broadly socialist hope to overcome societal deprivation and oppression through concrete and concerted actions of the many. But not all utopian strivings are created equal. In this article, I take a closer look at opposite ends of the spectrum of contemporary utopias. While the exclusive utopias of the global techno-capitalist elite sell “the better” to the highest bidder, reify borders and intensify exploitation, indigenous and youth social movements offer collective and inclusive visions predicated on justice, care, and respect for all of the Earth’s inhabitants.

Exclusive Visions

In response to mounting ecological breakdown, tech billionaires like Amazon founder Jeff Bezos and Tesla co-founder Elon Musk have been promoting attempts to flee to other planets, and this is no mere science fiction. NASA recently awarded \$ 1 billion to Musk’s aerospace company SpaceX, Bezos’ Blue Origin, and Dynetics for developing spacecraft for its Artemis 3 mission, the next moon landing scheduled for 2024 (NASA 2021). Musk’s SpaceX seeks to make the colonisation of Mars a possibility within the next decade, for \$ 200,000 per person, to preserve human civilisation in the event of a third world war. Its ultimate goal is to help humanity become a “multi-planet species” (Williamson 2016; Musk 2018). In decidedly utopian terms, Musk explains that “being a spacefaring civilization” is all about “believing in the future” and thinking that it will be “better than the past” (SpaceX 2021). Similarly, Bezos’ company Blue Origin is set on colonising the moon for resource extraction and production to realise his vision of human expansion throughout the cosmos (Murtola 2018). His other motivation is the assumption that ecological breakdown on Earth will be too severe to mitigate. Hence humans must colonise space to save the planet as well as themselves.

Musk’s and Bezos’ visions of a spacefaring civilisation are examples of what I call post-terrestrial utopianism. Instead of taking responsibility for dismantling exploitative and oppressive systems like capitalism and anthropocentrism, and actively curbing ecological breakdown on Earth, they seek to escape. These exclusive utopian visions of “the better” banish a multitude of human and nonhuman terrestrials to an increasingly inhospitable world while, via an extreme form of “climate apartheid”, the wealthy just buy their way out of eco-apocalypse (Brisman et al 2018). As Linda Billings (2019, 45) asks: “How many poverty-stricken Bangladeshis, how many sub-Saharan Africans, how many permanently displaced Syrian refugees, how many disabled and unemployable workers could come up with \$ 200,000 – or \$ 2,000, for that matter – to move to another planet and start a new life?” A similar trend on Earth can be seen in the luxury and high-security doomsday bunkers being constructed by the world’s super-rich to ride out a potential social and ecological apocalypse (Stamp 2019). Their utopian horizon is excessive wealth for a select few, enabled by endless expansion, commodification, extraction and exploitation of peoples and places. The Moon and Mars are their next colonial frontier.

Collective Futures

The utopianism of today’s progressive social and environmental movements is worlds apart. Fueled by the conviction that another world is possible, movements like the socialist Zapatistas, Occupy Wall Street, and more recently the Sunrise Movement and Extinction Rebellion, all began by crying a resounding “No!” to austerity and bank bailouts, wars, fracking, pipelines and oil subsidies, to the theft of land from local and indigenous communities, the privatisation of water and other vital resources, and to the increasing concentration of wealth in the hands of a tiny global minority. Rather than casting their sights to distant times and places in search of new colonial frontiers, these movements seek to build a better world for all in the here and now. The Sunrise Movement is a youth-led grassroots political movement “united in the shared fight to make real the promise of a society that works for everyone” (Sunrise Movement 2021). Specifically, they seek to combat the climate and socioeconomic crisis through a Green New Deal – a just transition across every sector of society such as housing, transport, and agriculture towards clean and renewable energy production while providing millions of well-paying jobs in the process. Thousands have mobilised across the US in non-vio-

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lent modes of activism, including occupying offices in the US Capitol, to push the Green New Deal onto the mainstream political stage.

In the Global South, indigenous peoples and movements continue to offer alternatives to the visions of the good life imposed by Western modernity. The philosophy of *Buen Vivir*, from the Quechuan *sumak kawsay* (good or plentiful living), is an amalgamation of alternative worldviews and approaches to Western capitalist development. It was composed from diverse sources by indigenous movements in Latin America, especially Ecuador and Bolivia, and critical scholars (Gudynas 2009, 50). *Buen Vivir* offers expansive visions of better worlds wherein the good life can only take place in community with other persons, both human and nonhuman, and nature. The very concept of “community”, linked to the Andean concept of the *ayllu*, defines wellbeing as that which encompasses not only persons, but also crops and cattle, and the rest of Nature (Gudynas 2011). The indigenous worldviews that underlie *Buen Vivir* see nature not as dead matter but as Mother Earth (*pachamama*) and a subject of rights (Caria/Domínguez 2016). In practice this has led to the enshrinement of the rights of nature in Ecuador’s constitution.

A Crisis of Imagination

As Naomi Klein recently observed, “the biggest challenge is overcoming the way neoliberalism has waged war on our collective imagination, on our ability to truly believe in anything outside its bleak borders” (Klein 2020, 239). Capitalism’s 500-year-reign has so thoroughly infused our collective imaginaries that it has come to seem as though there truly is no alternative – as infamously uttered by Margaret Thatcher (Thatcher 2013). However, there is nothing essential about living under capitalism. As the world’s myriad other cultures and indigenous traditions demonstrate, other ways of being have long preceded, continue to exist alongside of, and will come after capitalism. At this juncture, with socioeconomic inequality on the rise, mounting political instability, a climate in disarray and a sixth mass extinction event tearing holes in the rich tapestry of terrestrial life, we face urgent choices. It is a war of the worlds between exclusive visions of the future for a small, wealthy minority, and expansive and inclusive visions of a viable future by and for the many.

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AUTHOR + CONTACT

Dr. Heather Alberro is a lecturer at Nottingham Trent University specialising in critical posthumanism and green utopianism.

E-Mail: heather.alberro@ntu.ac.uk,
Internet: www.ntu.ac.uk/staff-profiles/social-sciences/heather-alberro

