

Commentary

Imaginaries and Realities, Utopia and Dystopia

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INTRODUCTION: CONTRADICTIONS OF HOPE AND DESPAIR

The dystopia thesis is an analysis of humanity's most serious problems of the present and a prediction of them being exacerbated and added to in the near future. I have presented this thesis in some detail in my 2010 book *Dystopia: What is to be done?* I also made a documentary film of the same name that is available for free viewing (<http://www.DystopiaFilm.com>). What I intend to do here, is to give a summarised flavour of the overall argument presented in the book and film, but also add some reflections upon the utopian dreams of both right and left, and more importantly consider the Left's continued failure to construct a left vision that captures ordinary people's imagination and enthusiasm.

The dystopia thesis propounds an argument that the structural features of the world political economy are such as to make the problems we collectively face impossible to solve. The dystopia thesis is grounded in present day fact and highly probabilistic trajectories and outcomes as regards the future. The logic and empirical content of the dystopia thesis concludes a near certain hopelessness with respect to avoiding a future of unimaginable horror and suffering. Causally inter-connected, mutually enhancing catastrophes, are around the corner . . . and there is *nothing* we can do to prevent them

Yet at the same time, the dystopia thesis was founded on the contradiction of pessimistic assessment and sincere hope. If one believed absolutely in the hopelessness of any effort to avert catastrophe what would be the point in articulating the argument?

Utopia and dystopia are bound up together in complex ways. Both have their causal effects of interpenetration of imaginaries and realities. For example, both liberal and socialist utopias form a part of contemporary dystopian reality, as ideological barriers to an accurate understanding of both the present and future possibilities. The apocalyptic media visions of life after the bomb . . . or virus or asteroid strike etc. etc., also contribute to a lack of understanding of what is now and what might come to pass in the near future. These imaginaries are part of our dystopian reality because they serve to deceive and mystify us with regard to real problems.

I will begin by summarising the dystopia thesis, giving particular attention to its knowledge, power and ideology component: the theory of structural mystification. I will then reflect upon some of the ways both utopian and dystopian fictions feed into this mystification. Finally, I shall embrace the dystopia thesis's own contradictions (that is to say my own) and discuss how a vision of hope is the only hope we have, how the dystopia thesis ultimately calls for a new Marxist imaginary, a realistically feasible, yet nonetheless inspiring, utopian vision to sustain us in our struggles.

This last component of this piece is perhaps too big to be anything other than a preliminary reflection here. It is a task I have been wrestling with ever since I began my work upon the dystopia thesis. The question of what is to be done was not part of my original project because quite frankly I only had the vaguest of vague ideas about what should be done. I was also, on some levels, persuaded that there was *nothing* to be done. I had only an instinct that sounding the alarm, as it were, might contribute to mitigating the horrors to come. However, as the project progressed it became clear that I simply could not present the dystopian vision and argument without engaging with potential strategies for dealing with the problems

With respect to many of the dystopia thesis's individual components, many people have provided far gloomier assessments than I. I tended to be rather cautious with predictions of catastrophe and apocalypse. But the cumulative emotional effect of seeing put together as a causally inter-linked conclusion, all the worst environmental problems facing humankind, along with all the most extreme suffering of poverty and disease, appeared to be too much for most of the people I consulted with. They told me that *some* strategies for the amelioration of crises had to at least be entertained, along with the analysis of their cause. Some balance of hope *had to be given* along with analysis of calamity

However, my reflections upon the question of what is to be done began with critique. The analysis was of the inadequacies of many of the popular propounded solutions to the problems that were most serious. For example, the technocratic solutions to the world's food or transport problems may have some value but miss the main point: the problems are most significantly political-economic problems rather than technological. For another example, charity may mitigate a small amount of suffering in the immediate present but cannot even begin to address the ocean of pain deriving from the systematically produced extremes of world poverty

Finally, I realized that utopian thinking, the right kind of utopian thinking that is, is actually a necessary counter-point to the dystopia thesis. It is a great irony that left-wing analysis, more specifically Marxist analysis, is everywhere being proven correct and yet is not attended to. Capitalism is in crisis on many fronts. There are rumblings of resistance and revolution in many parts of the world. And yet in the First World, most particularly in the American "heart of the beast", where some of the contradictions of wealth and poverty are most extreme, *the left has never been weaker*. My conclusion with respect to this, is that while intellectual analysis of the problems has never been as acute, there still lacks an inspiring vision of a better world that is realistic enough for masses of people to see beyond the inertia of their present day to day living. Reflection upon this situation shall be the conclusion of the article.

THE DYSTOPIA THESIS

The first argument of the dystopia thesis is that the future of misery and crisis that is dystopia is already here. Perhaps a billion people live lives of such dreadful daily experience as to reduce any concerns about the future to the most immediate. They are starving or close to starving. They are watching their children being sold into the slavery of bonded labour or prostitution. They are dying of malaria or plague or tuberculosis or AIDs or any number of diseases. They live in a mundane poverty-stricken everyday life. Or worse, they are incarcerated and perhaps are being tortured this very second. The list can go on and on through the drama of war and refugees, to the boredom and unpleasantness of under-paid, soul-destroying employment or unemployment. The future is already here for a billion people, if the future is dystopia

The dystopia thesis's predictions of the future are mainly simple probabilistic extensions of present problems being exacerbated. We are just beginning to see the effects of global warming but we can well

imagine increased future problems of flooding and hurricanes. And global warming is merely the most dramatic of the wide variety of environmental problems facing us. Many of these link up with issues of resource shortages and energy. So yes, the dystopia thesis is a very simple argument in many respects: things that are bad now and are going to get worse

However, entirely new problems are coming as well. Peak oil will add to existing inequality, suffering, terrorism and warfare. But even more importantly, at some point, it will make our existing socio-political economic system impossible to maintain. There *will* be a post-carbon economy. This is coming whatever we do. But the dystopia thesis predicts an excruciatingly painful transition to this post-carbon future

The dystopia thesis is also a causal analysis. On the one hand, it takes note of the immense complexity of inter-linkages of problems and causality. It observes the positive feedback loops and their snowballing effects. On the other hand, however, it posits a broad context of common structural causality. The world capitalist system possesses structural features that ensures extreme inequality and thus poverty. Poverty is not only an effect that is suffered but is in turn a cause of many, many other problems. In this regard, the dystopia thesis is essentially Marxist. It thus sees inequality, unemployment and poverty as features of the world political economy that are *not* contingent but rather are *fundamental* to the system

Unemployment rates (in any country), for example, may rise or fall; that much is contingent upon a variety of factors; but whether there is to be unemployment or not at all, that is *not* a variable. Some level of unemployment is functionally *necessary* to the system. This is among the reasons why the dystopia thesis rejects reformism as a potential solution to the avoidance of dystopia

The world capitalist system is just that, a *world* system¹. Globalization is not something new; it is an on-going developing process that emerged simultaneously with the birth of capitalism. The development of the richer countries was dependent upon the lack of development in the poorer. Development and underdevelopment evolved together. The wealth of the rich, whether it be people or nations, is dependent upon the lack thereof by the poor

The particularities of recent global economic change and the neo-liberal economic ideologies and policies that have driven them have had many dire consequences of course. But neo-liberalism *per*

1 I am indebted for the World Systems theory here to Immanuel Wallerstein and Andre Gunder Frank.

se is not the real problem. *Capitalism* is the real problem. A return to Keynesian economic policies may well save capitalism from some of its contemporary crises . . . but it will not save *us* from dystopia². It will not save the world; inequality will be maintained; the *suffering* of that inequality will be maintained; environmental destruction will continue unabated.

In addition to a structural logic of profit which necessitates inequality, the world capitalist system has a structurally determined time-frame for decision and action. It has a temporal logic, which ensures that potentially beneficial decisions and actions of collective pain avoidance and responsible environmental stewardship will come too late. The peak oil problem can be used to clearly illustrate this.

As we all know, the problem of peak oil is not that we will run out of oil eventually. Rather it is that after the capacity for world production peaks, demand will not slacken but continue its ever increasing pressure. Prices will dramatically rise to a point whereby the present world system of trade and commerce, of energy and transport, of agriculture and consumption, simply will not be able to continue without drastic change. We will move into what people are beginning to call a post-carbon world.

The dystopian point with respect to the peak oil problem is not that a post-carbon world is necessarily a future to be feared. No, the problem, the future to be feared, is the *transition* to it. We could imagine (and people have, which we will discuss in a moment) a post-carbon economy and world as actually a good thing in many ways. What world capitalism will ensure is that the sensible planning in advance that would enable a smooth painless major transition of economy and lifestyle will not occur. Capitalism's political-economic temporal logic forbids it.

There is a further key factor in capitalism which keeps our most serious problems from being effectively engaged with. This is the problem of power and knowledge and ideology.

STRUCTURAL MYSTIFICATION

Structural mystification is the negative side of the dialectical contradiction found in the institutional production of knowledge. Structural mystification exists as a counterpart to the real knowledge production and dissemination practices of the media, the education system and all other institutions fundamentally concerned with the production and dissemination of knowledge

2 See the excellent critique of the return to Keynesian economics by Richard Wolff (2011).

The relationship between power and knowledge has been theorized in innumerable ways. Ideology has also been theorized from many conflicting, and frequently confusing, perspectives. The key points of the theory of structural mystification, however, are clear and relatively simple³. Power sometimes corrupts the production and dissemination of knowledge. But it is not as though the production of knowledge could take place *without* the influence of power relations. No, institutional power relations also *facilitate* the production and dissemination of knowledge. This is why the relationship between power and knowledge is dialectical. Knowledge production (and dissemination) most significantly takes place within institutions. The institutions all have within them a dialectical contradiction

For example, the university generally is fundamentally concerned with the production and dissemination of knowledge. This is not a contingent feature but essential to the very nature of what a university is. That that is not all the institution is, does not change this fact. Knowledge production is fundamental in a way that having a football team is not (however important that may be for some universities). But also fundamental to the very nature of a university, is the dialectical opposite to knowledge production and dissemination: the obfuscation of the production of knowledge and the restriction and sometimes outright prevention of the dissemination of knowledge. While all university faculty would be forced to acknowledge that this sometimes occurs, few are aware that it is *not* a contingent feature

The university, amongst other things, is a complex structural hierarchy of power relations. Further, it is connected to the broader hierarchies and complexities of the power relations of the world . . . of the world capitalist system. This is not any simple matter of conspiracy or propaganda or intentional distortion. Rather the production and dissemination of knowledge takes place at the nexus of many different levels of conflict

There is frequently a conflict between the institution and the government in terms of priorities of spending on research and pedagogy, and in terms of academic freedom of speech and critique and dissent. There is an ongoing conflict between the priorities of the board of governors and the university senate. There is a constant scrambling over scarce resources between faculties and departments. There is genuine intellectual debate and politically coerced loyalties and acts of bad faith. There is not only conflict between individuals but conflict *within* individuals.

3 For a more complete account see Potter, 2010c.

There is a struggle to “do the right thing” and a struggle to know what that is. It is both a moral and an intellectual struggle . . . and one that takes place very often within a mystifying fog . . . a mystifying fog that they both suffer and frequently help to construct. It is not for nothing that the word “academic” also has a pejorative sense to it. And as Pierre Bourdieu (1988, p. 207) puts it, academics are often “mystified mystifiers” the first ideological victims of the operations of power and classification they perform.

Structural mystification is also structurally embedded within science itself. Yes, even that tremendous tool for acquiring information and potential understanding of so many things is frequently corrupted through its practical and ideological contextualization within the wider political economy. And yet science on another level, is absolutely our only hope of coming to terms with the crises of dystopia.

There is a plethora of examples to choose from to make these points about science here. But I will briefly mention the “hydrogen highway” and hydrogen automobile. The hydrogen car (in a variety of formats) is often propounded by politicians and auto makers as the future solution to the problems of global warming and peak oil. It doesn’t use oil and it doesn’t pollute (directly). There is not space in this article to go into the practical limitations of this technology in relation to the political economy of it. These have been thoroughly explored elsewhere (see for example Demirbas, 2009, Romm, 2005, and the unattributed article on the Alternative Energies website). No, the major importance of the hydrogen “solution” is mystificatory. Its practical realization is always far enough in the future as to necessitate a continuance of the gasoline vehicle status quo. The utopian promise of the idea is sufficient though, to deflect political action toward any more immediately viable technological solutions

Knowledge production and dissemination, including scientific knowledge production and dissemination, is profoundly affected by politics . . . and politics is profoundly affected by knowledge . . . and the lack of it. The problems of dystopia, whether global poverty or global warming, require *radical* change. Radical change requires significant mass-scale collective political will. Political will requires knowledge. The knowledge gets produced, as does its mystifying ideological counter-arguments and “facts”. The knowledge gets distributed . . . on a restricted scale. The knowledge gets produced and receives a restricted dissemination but the ideological counter-points are trumpeted and/or subtly and insidiously whispered in the media, or taught in the schools or even at home

Among the most potent elements of dystopia with respect to knowledge and ideology are the utopian visions that grab the collective imagination. The utopian imaginaries are part and parcel of our dystopian reality.

THE UTOPIAN DREAM OF CAPITALIST REFORM

Slavoj Žižek quotes John Caputo (Caputo and Vattimo, 2009, p. 124-125) to make a point about utopian thinking concerning the possibilities of reforming the capitalist system:

I would be perfectly happy if the far left politicians in the United States were able to reform the system by providing universal health care, effectively redistributing wealth more equitably with a revised IRS code, effectively restricting campaign financing, enfranchising all voters, treating migrant workers humanely, and effecting multilateral foreign policy that would integrate American power within the international community etc., i.e., intervene upon capitalism by means of serious and far-reaching reforms. . . . If after doing all that Badiou and Žižek complained that some monster called Capital still stalks us, I would be inclined to greet that Monster with a yawn.

Žižek (2009, p. 79) does not dispute whether such reforms would make for a better world, or even if we might be better able to remain within the system if such far reaching reforms were possible. Instead he argues that:

The problem lies with the “utopian premise” that it is possible to achieve all that within the coordinates of global capitalism. What if the particular malfunctionings of capitalism enumerated by Caputo are not merely accidental disturbances but are rather structurally necessary?

Just to be completely clear, I will answer Žižek’s rhetorical question. The “malfunctionings” are not such at all; the ill treatment of migrant workers, for example, is certainly a moral shame, but it is not because of an accidental flaw in the system. No, it and the rest enumerated by Caputo, are *structurally necessary to the system*.

UTOPIAN VISIONS AND DYSTOPIAN REALITIES

Vision. This is what we would like to see in our political leaders. In America, and elsewhere as well of course, but especially in America, vision is in short supply. So we are given utopian fiction. But it is often presented not as a vision of the future but as a pious hope for the present, through the idealized glasses of memory. It was not President Bush or Clinton or Reagan that gave us this poetized vision, a:

... reminder of the time when two powerful nations challenged each other and then boldly raced into outer space. What would be the next thing to challenge us, that makes us go farther and work harder? You know when smallpox was eradicated? It was considered the single greatest humanitarian achievement of the century. Surely we can do it again. As we did in a time when our eyes looked towards the heavens and with outstretched fingers, we touched the face of God.

Yes, poetic indeed, but it was President Bartlett of *The West Wing* (episode 5, 1999), not Obama, that articulated this vision of past and future. Its resonance, of course, is with Kennedy and the beginnings of the "space race". But along with Kennedy's perceived martyrdom (to what exactly?, I often wonder) goes a collective amnesia of the real fear of nuclear holocaust and a total ignorance of what was really going on with the Cuban missile crisis. Forgotten also, is the Bay of Pigs; and most of all it is forgotten that it was with Kennedy that the American involvement in Vietnam began

The eradication of smallpox was undoubtedly a truly wonderful achievement. Bartlett says: "Surely we can do it again". And of course this *should* be true. But this utopian moral imperative, stands alongside the historical reality of the tragic failure to eradicate malaria.

In 1958, the worldwide effort to eradicate malaria began in earnest. It was led by Paul Russell from Harvard's School of Public Health. The United States Congress directly allocated \$23 million a year towards the battle. It also provided 90 percent of the World Health Organization's anti-malaria budget and a significant proportion of the budgets of the Pan-American Health Organization and UNICEF (United Nations Children's Education Foundation). This constituted a financial commitment in the order of billions in today's dollars.

It was a serious commitment to eradicate a serious collective human problem. But it also was an effort with a definite time limit to it. Paul Russell in his *International Development Advisory Board Report* emphasized the time line of malaria eradication: four years of DDT spraying and four years of monitoring that there are three consecutive years of no mosquito transmission in an area. He also emphasized the dangers of failing to complete the program of eradication: DDT resistance, renewed disease pandemics and a virtual economic impossibility of having another attempt in the future be successful.

A four-year commitment was made, and four years of funding was what was given. Four years were *nearly* enough. In 1955, Sri Lanka had a million cases of malaria. In 1963, it had only eighteen.

Only another two or three years of concerted effort and financial commitment would have given the world the same success with malaria as it had had with smallpox. But the funding was cut off⁴.

The result, of course, was not merely the failure to eradicate something that was eradicable. The result was to make the problem worse, much worse. The insects developed resistance to DDT and other pesticides. The malarial parasites developed resistances to quinine, chloroquine and other drugs. Most importantly, in areas where the mosquitoes and disease would almost certainly make a comeback, many millions of people now lacked all resistance to the disease. By cutting off funding to the eradication efforts, Congress and the other “money people” were condemning millions of people to death in the future. Such is the relationship between the time frame for capitalist political economic planning and future calamity. Such is the relation between eloquent vision and a sad reality.

But if the harsh reality stands in contrast to utopian vision there is something rather pathetic about the vision as well. People often imagine utopia as something very like small town America in the fifties. The dark side of this hope was portrayed nicely in the film *Pleasantville* (Ross, 1998). But as good as this film was, it cannot stand in comparison to the real life utopian monument to this vision of the world. I’m speaking here of the Disney-built small town *Celebration* near *Disney World* in Florida. It looks like Main Street USA in Disney Land but it is a real town that people live and work in. As someone once put it “It just seems to be the perfect little town back in a nicer time. Except it feels creepy”.⁵

WHAT IS TO BE DONE?

The answers to the question of what is to be done which I gave in my book and film were all fairly obvious. They could be fundamentally articulated in a number of traditional leftist slogans: “The people (the Left, the workers) united will never be defeated”, “Union!”, “One Solution, Revolution” “Occupy, Resist, Produce” and so on. I advocated boycotts and protests and taking it to the street. I criticized reformist compromise and charitable band-aids. In short, I advocated what the radical left has advocated for years.

That these activities and slogans are obvious does not diminish their importance nor their power to effect change (witness Tunisia

4 I am indebted to Laurie Garret’s excellent (1995, p. 48-52) account for all the factual information of this history.

5 Name withheld by request.

or Egypt for recent examples of this). But still, in the face of all the forces of structural mystification, something crucial seems lacking. The masses may have been teeming into the streets of Tunis and Cairo; the poor may have come down from the shanty towns of Caracas to have thwarted the 2002 coup in Venezuela, but. . .while the arrest report of Toronto's 2010 G20 protests was impressive in terms of numbers, the numbers of people who merely peacefully marched in protest was on a relative scale, pitifully small. Most Torontonians, most Canadians, simply went about their ordinary business and watched the violence on TV as a spectacle which had nothing to do with them. My point here again is obvious; Cairo and Toronto are different worlds; the developed and the developing, the core and the periphery, are miles apart in present political potential, as well as in terms of their economies

But the problem is that we are one world; so the "First World" needs a revolution too. But the political consciousness is not there. . .or rather it is not *here*. There are contradictions in this. The majority of the affluent middle classes in countries such as Canada or the US cannot seem to grasp what is obvious to millions of peasants and workers in the developing world. Is it that their affluence blinds them? Some would have us think so. But there is more to it than that

Marxist analysis of capitalism is repeatedly, and everywhere, being proven correct. Right wing ideology is not faring well. We have had, for example, such an intellectual big gun for laissez-faire capitalism as Alan Greenspan admitting he was fundamentally wrong. . . about everything. Yet in North America and Europe, the left has never been weaker. Why?

I don't presume to reduce the answer to this question to a single cause. However, I do want to focus here upon *one* of the causes. The left has thus far failed to articulate a positive vision of the future that truly catches people's imagination!

There is, of course, a good historical and analytical set of reasons for this failure. Early in its history socialist thought divided in terms of hard and soft. Proponents of these softer versions of socialism seemed to spend a lot of time dreaming. For many Marxists the term "utopian socialism" was a pejorative. . .and rightly so. To spell out in great detail a picture of the future without having paid any attention to the process of getting there, without a proper appreciation of the problems of the present, is utopian in this negative sense, simply because the thinking is unrealistic.

It may be the case that there also is a certain, necessarily utopian element, to the dream of overthrowing of Capital. But can one dream and still be realistic? Can we fly and yet be grounded? Good Marxist analysis does not predict too specifically about the future. It rightly concludes that there are simply too many variables for such to be sensibly done. So where does that leave us?

One of the excellent stunts of the Yes Men (2009) has given me an idea in this regard. They printed and distributed a hoax version of *The New York Times*. This satirical version of *The Times* had such headlines as “Iraq War Ends”, “Maximum Wage Law Succeeds” “Popular Pressure Ushers Recent Progressive Tilt: Study Cites Movements for Massive Shift in DC” and “Nationalized Oil to Fund Climate Change Efforts”. There was a small caption by their Times banner that gave me the idea: “All the News We Hope to Print”. We cannot realistically articulate a detailed far-off in the future vision. But we can clearly see what is wrong *now*. This can be our realistically grounded imaginary: the many problems being *immediately solved*

Let us begin articulating things that could be done, things *just beyond* the political realities of the moment, but nonetheless easily imagined. I have had so many conversations with ideology derived ignorant people about socialism. “Well, if all property is going to be shared, does that mean somebody else will be allowed to use my toothbrush?”. Or “. . . just how exactly is it going to be organized for people to do their little bit of literary criticism in the afternoon?”. The conversation needs to be changed. John Steinbeck articulated the direction of such a change in his classic novel *The Grapes of Wrath*: “What’s a Red anyway?” “A Red is somebody who, if you’re getting paid 15 cents an hour thinks you should get 25” “Oh . . . I guess I’m a Red then”. It is testimony to the power of such simplicity that when Hollywood made their film of this novel they transformed this conversation. In answer to the question of what a Red was the answer was given; “It’s hard to say. . . I really don’t know”. So instead of trying to present some detailed blueprint of the far-off future, let us give a series of questions and strong simple answers to people about the present and the *immediate* future . . . of what could be done.

How can we eliminate hunger in the world? We can take the entire Canadian wheat crop and offer to transport it free to where food is most urgently needed. Could we afford to do this? Yes, it would take an evenly distributed tax increase of only about 2% to afford to have Canada save the world from starvation all by itself! How can we provide basic education and health care to the whole world’s population? Well, we could

take half of Bill Gates' money, and half of Warren Buffet's money, and this special tax upon the two of them could alone easily finance the effort.

The serious problems of poverty could be realistically costed. These costs could then be presented along with the estimates of individual wealth. Yes, personalizing it would make a great difference. People seem to get lost when one talks about the top one percent of one percent. Four hundred people in the US have a combined wealth greater than the wealth of half of the population of the US (Johnston, 2011). People's heads swim when one talks about the trillions of dollars spent on defense. We need to present to people what could be done for the price of a fleet of battleships or a single stealth fighter. We need to present to people that such and such changes in the national and international laws relevant to generic drugs would save exactly how many lives of people dying of AIDS or TB.

I am not arguing for a single campaign. No, it needs to be bigger than that. The Left, the *world's Left*, needs to continually present a vision of all the things that could be so quickly and easily done to make a better world. "A better world now" could be the new slogan arising from an unflinching look at the horror of dystopia.

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