

# UTOPIAS

## An Introduction

---

*Mark Featherstone and Malcolm Miles*

The focus of this special issue of *Cultural Politics* is the politics of utopia and dystopia in the contemporary world, where motivated social change no longer seems possible, or is at least remote. Capital's overwhelming imperative to consume renders hope of radical or wide-scale social, economic, and political change seemingly impossible, so that the legacy of Francis Fukuyama's (1992) end of history thesis—a philosophical rerun of Margaret Thatcher's TINA (There Is No Alternative)—is, precisely, a permanent present. However, it is just possible that recent shocks to the global economic system, which demonstrate the irrationality of market forces (as well as their basis in wealth accumulation for the few at the expense of the many), have provoked the emergence of a global apocalyptic, or dystopic, tone. The central message of this tone, or atmosphere, which colors cultural perceptions of the future of globalization, is that the global system we currently inhabit no longer works—actually, it never did—and is unsustainable, not only in terms of its own ambitions, but also because of the increasingly pressing need to address climate change. Yet there are few alternative worldviews that suggest a new way within the current parameters of the liberal, democratic, capitalist hegemon. Beyond these parameters, after the demise of state socialism in the 1990s, is what might be called an uncharted terrain. But this can also be called an experimental, utopian terrain. Utopia has been progressively demonized over the course of the liberal period because of its association with totalitarian politics in the Eastern bloc, and yet, it is

perhaps here, in new forms of (another) New Left, that we must look for our alternatives to the current impasse. The utopian represents a strange, foreboding place in the contemporary global world because of its forced association with Stalin and Hitler, but it is to this psycho-political place that people may be drawn, simply because the current model of neoliberal, consumer capitalist globalization appears fatally flawed as well as intrinsically unjust. Perhaps, then, the present, which had, since the 1970s, seemed permanently oriented toward consumerism, represents a critical moment when one paradigm seems likely to give way. In the resulting cracks, a new model of social, political, and economic organization will emerge.

The objective of this special issue of *Cultural Politics* is to explore this critical moment through discussions of both the dystopic articulation of the present and explorations of the ways in which this dystopian worldview points toward alternative utopian futures.

In many respects, the financial crisis that engulfed the world's largest economies in 2008, and has continued to reverberate since, represented the end of the epoch of neoliberal capitalism introduced by Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan in the late 1970s and early 1980s and advanced by global organizations such as the International Monetary Fund through the 1990s and into the 2000s. The inexorable rise to global dominance of the neoliberal model from the late 1970s onward was, of course, punctuated by the fall of the Berlin Wall, the breakup of the Soviet Union, and the collapse of Eastern European socialism. These events were, in part, produced by a limited consumerism within the Eastern bloc, which could not deliver the dreams conjured by the more aggressive media consumerism of

the West. At the same time, the Chinese economic miracle, and the rise of a new brand of Red, or authoritarian, capitalism, led many to believe that capitalist economics was now the only game in town. Thinkers such as Francis Fukuyama (1992) felt confident in being able to assert the end of history, if even the Chinese were on the way to becoming liberal, democratic, and Western—which, of course, assumed that the Chinese turn to the market would be followed by democracy (it wasn't). Large-scale historical change was considered to be over. *Unhistorical struggle*, such as the war on terror, might continue in its asymmetrical ways, but there would be no more serious ideological change. Conflicts would be dispersed and localized. Strangely, most alternative scenarios that have been proposed were even more so, and hence open to the charge that they work only on a microscale and have no wider application. Herein resides the origin of the neoliberal capitalist global utopia—a global ideological form without opposition—which, it is possible to argue, we have lived with since the late 1980s.

We know the rest. In what we might see as a paradigmatic case of the Hegelian cunning of reason, at the very moment when this model of social, political, economic, and cultural organization appeared absolutely dominant, the new capitalist utopia began to fail, cracking under the weight of its own success. Despite a lack of serious ideological opposition—since the anticapitalist left did not seriously threaten the hegemonic position of the capitalist utopia in the early years of the twenty-first century—the fantasy of a completely self-regulating economic machine organized around the production of profit started to collapse due to its own excesses. The years since 2008 have represented a period of *interval*, defined

by desperate attempts to reboot the global economy and to transform the neoliberal ideological landscape by seeking to blame the masses for their exorbitant consumption while excusing the social irresponsibility of a model of government organized around individualism and the production of individual gain. These efforts to rebuild the neoliberal hegemon have been unsuccessful, primarily because the fantastical capitalist utopia was premised on a model of endless growth that was never sustainable given the reality of scarcity. Even when we hear about recovery, it is a recovery for transnational elites, and there is little sense that the serious problems of the global order, relating to environmental issues, democratic representation, and social inequality, have been addressed.

However, not only have the responses meant to stabilize the neoliberal model not been successful in their own terms, but they have also produced serious political consequences on a global scale. In the “developed” West, these political consequences have largely been the result of the breakdown of a model of accumulation premised on the deferral of class antagonism in a fantastical credit bubble. For a while, the super-rich continued to get richer, the middle classes were pumped up on credit, and the rest were excluded in a form of society organized around the principle of sacrifice. In global terms, the West consumed on the basis of the production of the rest, who were pushed ever further into poverty and misery. The latter situation, which was defended by military force and a globalized native elite, has not changed, but the former intra-Western conservative complex has broken down, as the pumped-up middle classes, who had lived in a state of permanent precariousness, have been progressively impoverished and are now being cast into

the ranks of the forgotten poor, or what Guy Standing (2011) calls the precariat. This shift has led to the reemergence of a consciousness of class antagonism in the West and produced a view that the neoliberal model has ceased to be socially functional or sustainable. The ranks of the multitude, previously in conflict with a system that the large middle classes of the developed nations still felt they could believe in, have now been swollen by disillusioned, rejected, and redundant members of these old insider classes, who, increasingly, find themselves outside a system that no longer pretends to be interested either in the integrity of the nation-state or in the well-being of any but the few—the “1 percent,” to use the term popularized by the Occupy movement in 2011.

Related to this collapse of faith in the neoliberal utopia, the political and economic elites have proved more or less incapable of resolving the crisis and restoring the conditions of growth upon which neoliberalism depends. It is this, if nothing else, that symbolizes the end of the end of history and the rise of calls to rethink the fundamentals of the relationships between economy, politics, philosophy, culture, and society. Caught in this period of interval, when the dominant ideas seem bankrupt and new ideas concerning social organization have yet to emerge, thinkers such as Alain Badiou (2012a) and Slavoj Žižek (2010) have championed a return to communism. While Badiou argues that what we need is a principle, or idea, of communistic justice, which can animate our political practice that has for too long been organized around pragmatics, Žižek suggests that action is what matters, and that what we must do is overturn the neoliberal system, rather than spend our time caught up in endless debate. We

must act, rather than remain rooted in apathy. Capturing the spirit of the times, and similarly suggesting that our primary problem is a lack of energy, the French thinker Bernard Stiegler (2012) argues that contemporary capitalism has lost its spirit. Nobody believes in capitalism, especially neoliberal capitalism, anymore. We are exhausted, and we need to reenergize our societies by finding new meanings in the world. In this view, since the industrial economic model has failed due to its faithless instrumentalism, what we must now do is design a politics adequate to the postindustrial new age. The old model knows metabolism and nothing else, and there is no meaning in this endless cycle of production and consumption. Humans, who are human by virtue of the way in which they construct meaning in the world, cannot live on meaningless work and the promise of consumption, because even in the best-case scenario, where the riches of the capitalist utopia have become accessible, there is no real significance in a society that has been defined by the theories of Adam Smith, Friedrich Hayek, Milton Friedman, Margaret Thatcher, Ronald Reagan, and their followers. In Stiegler's view, the consumer utopia is, thus, bankrupt, empty, and insignificant. Badiou and Žižek agree. They explain that capitalist civilization is *worldless*, whereas humans, of course, live in worlds, which they make through cultural practices that imbue the environment they inhabit with meaning and significance.

Although none of these writers directly engages with the theory of utopia, or uses the terminology of utopia and dystopia, their thought nevertheless employs the conceptual machinery of utopia, and its polar opposite dystopia, to the degree that the global crisis can be understood as representing a moment of extremity,

or ruination, a moment of collapse, which will produce a dystopian society organized around the authoritarian governance of haves and have nots and the generalized decline of spirit and belief, unless we are able to rethink the fundamentals of society, politics, and economics and construct a different way of living. Indeed, according to each of these thinkers, we are already living in dystopia. While Badiou (2012b) talks about "daily humiliation," and Žižek (2009, 2010) discusses systemic, objective violence and writes of living in the end-times, Stiegler (2012) tells us we are living in uncontrollable societies, where people have simply abandoned the hegemonic norms and values associated with capitalism. Thus, dystopia is now. We live dystopia every day but fail to confront it because we have normalized it out of existence. In this context, Badiou, Žižek, and Stiegler seek to achieve a recuperation of the dystopian imagination in the name of a utopian possibility. In other words, it is only when we confront the worst, and understand that the way things are now cannot continue, that we realize that we must change our situation and invent the new. That is, to put the matter in simple Marxist terms, we need to reorient the conditions by which we are conditioned. It is possible to see this political position played out in practical resistance to crash-era neoliberalism. The paradigmatic case of resistance to the new spiritless model of neoliberalism that has no sense of a future is the Occupy movement, in which demonstrators have sought to carve out a static space within the turbulence of the utopia of friction-free capitalism to think through basic questions of social, political, and economic organization. Facing the crisis, the occupiers have sought to invent the new, or at least create the possibility of possibility. Occupy has created the space

for a shift from the neoliberal utopian model, organized on the basis of inequality (whether this is considered meritocratic or not), to some other form of social organization through a popularization of David Graeber's idea of the 1 percent / 99 percent split, or division, in wealth and property (see Graeber 2013).

What the popularization of the Occupy slogan symbolizes is, first, a recognition of global inequality and a realization of the dystopic present, and, second, a challenge to reinvent the social form through utopian politics and, of particular importance for this special issue, the utopian imagination. We, as editors, respond to this challenge through a return to dystopic thought and a utopian politics of fundamentals, desires, and imaginary solutions. In this way, the current crisis is viewed in dystopic terms, as a hyperbolic cultural construction that can help us to derange, or denormalize, the present, in order to better react, and to rethink the ways in which we might transform the world, for the sake of the future to come. Our project is, then, one concerned with cultural politics, with thinking about the ways in which the future, and the new, might emerge from a political present that seems exhausted, and with how it might do so via diverse, and not necessarily coherent, revisionings of the world. As such, there is a certain modernity about our project. But this is not a modernity organized around core principles, such as scientific thought and progress through technology, or through the instrumentalism that undermined modernist architecture and urban planning. Instead, it is a generic, experimental, utopian form of modernity concerned with openness to the future and how we might extract the possibility of the new from the ruins of the present. But is this more than a salvage operation? Just as the

liberating, progressive aspects of modern culture were trashed as some kind of state despotism and buried in the rubble of demolished tower-blocks, so the hope that informed and, in many ways, shaped modernist culture remains a dynamic force for change. The first step, perhaps, is to reimagine the world and to reclaim the ways in which meanings in the world are produced, conveyed, and shared.

The political philosopher Antonio Negri (1999) writes about this still potent form of modernity through his analysis of Spinoza and has coined the term *disutopia* to capture a form of utopianism without end, one that resists the authoritarian caricature so often employed by liberal elites to condemn politics associated with change and support the exhausted global capitalist system. In the face of the exhausted present, the challenge of cultural politics is to escape from the straightjacket of neoliberal politics, which defines the limits of possibility, and to think otherwise. Moreover, since the failure of the political imagination associated with the capitalist utopia is an international one, this project is truly global in nature. It cannot remain within the strictures of the Anglo-American/European West but, rather, must propose a model of the utopian imagination fit for the twenty-first century and able to respond to the crisis with suggestions about where the world might go from here. There are, of course, historical models that can educate us about our contemporary predicament, and Badiou (2012b) provides examples of these in his discussions of the Paris Commune and Mao's Cultural Revolution, but we cannot rely on these case studies today. Instead, we must seek to invent the new—to move beyond Badiou's event, which opens up the possibility of possibility, and suggest utopian responses to the contemporary critical condition. The

purpose of this special issue is to explore the traces of utopianism in contemporary cultural politics. If the global economic crash, the crisis, represented an event, and the emergence of the possibility of possibility, our challenge is to answer this call and think the new.

So, we reconsider the concepts of dystopia and utopia from the vantage point of the contemporary critical moment in order to imagine possible worlds that are very different from those prescribed for us by capital. In the first article of the collection, John Beck and Mark Dorrian develop the idea of the imagined geography of utopia and dystopia through a discussion of Cold War narratives of catastrophe and escape. Here, imagined utopian and dystopian scenarios are located above and below the world in endless space and fiery underworlds. Building upon Beck and Dorrian's contribution, Gair Dunlop's piece extends the discussion of spaces of utopia and dystopia through an exploration of the origins of the computational information society at Bletchley Park in the English countryside. Beyond this discussion of the Ur-space of the contemporary information society, Mark Chou's piece tracks forward to focus on the dystopian closure of democratic politics in contemporary America. While Beck and Dorrian's piece focuses on Cold War fiction, the dystopia explored in Chou's piece is very real and concerns the problem Alexis de Tocqueville identified in the middle of the nineteenth century—America's obsession with economy means that its political democracy cannot survive. For Chou, it is this scenario, which places us in the teeth of the end of history, which opens space for the new, for a democracy beyond democracy. The two articles that follow Chou's piece take up the politics of utopia and dystopia in contemporary

China. In the first, Mark Featherstone explores the interactions between the contemporary Chinese dream and dystopia in the recent novel *The Fat Years*, while in the second, Tao Dongfeng examines the cultural politics of amusement and entertainment in the contemporary Chinese context. In both, the issue under consideration is the relationship between the possibilities of the future and the realities of a present that is being lived out in a kind of narcotic haze.

The special issue expands upon these concerns through the inclusion of Thierry Bardini's interview with the Italian autonomist Paolo Virno regarding notions of social individualism, creativity, and the imagination. The core issue here is an exploration of the ways in which utopian change relies on a mode of subjectivity open to creative possibility and the future. The subsequent article further explores this theme, as Jonathan Harris considers the history of utopian globalist art and the ways in which modern art concerned with utopian criticism has interacted with utopian political movements. Finally, in the closing article of the issue, Malcolm Miles addresses the meaning of protest and utopian critique in contemporary art. As in the other contributions that make up this special issue, Miles's essay is concerned with how cultural work can create a vantage point within the present that can enable a view out over the future, one that can offer hope and a sense of possibility. As he argues, it is not really that protest drives history, or reproduces the conditions of which radical political movements used to dream, but that it creates a gap—an interruption—in which there is no obvious script to follow. The act of merely following is no longer an imperative because it is simply impossible. Power leaks. TINA breaks down.

At that point, everything can be thought again. And it may just be that it can be, and will be, as global capital runs the world onto the rocks. Writing on the Deepwater Horizon disaster of 2010, Žižek (2010) asserts that the unexpected outcome of the event was an uncanny fusion of trauma and ridicule. Viewed through the subjective eyes of the 99 percent, the present is ridiculous. This does not mean it cannot go on—many banal scenarios have been perpetuated in history—but it does mean that it cannot be seen as the only option, except in an excessively jaundiced world where utter cynicism rules. Maybe that is our world, the abject outcome of decades of hope's suppression and marginalization (for instance, as fit only for the sandpit subworld of the arts). Or maybe it isn't.

### References

- Badiou, Alain. 2012a. *Plato's Republic: A Dialogue in Sixteen Chapters*. Translated by Susan Spitzer. Cambridge: Polity.
- Badiou, Alain. 2012b. *The Rebirth of History: Times of Riots and Uprisings*. Translated by Gregory Elliott. London: Verso.
- Fukuyama, Francis. 1992. *The End of History and the Last Man*. London: Penguin.
- Graeber, David. 2013. *The Democracy Project: A History, a Crisis, a Movement*. London: Allen Lane.
- Negri, Antonio. 1999. *The Savage Anomaly: The Power of Spinoza's Metaphysics and Politics*. Translated by Michael Hardt. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Standing, Guy. 2011. *The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class*. London: Bloomsbury.
- Stiegler, Bernard. 2012. *Uncontrollable Societies of Disaffected Individuals*. Vol. 2 of *Disbelief and Discredit*, translated by Daniel Ross. Cambridge: Polity.
- Žižek, Slavoj. 2009. *Violence*. London: Profile.
- Žižek, Slavoj. 2010. *Living in the End Times*. London: Verso.

---

**Mark Featherstone** is senior lecturer in sociology at Keele University. He is the author of *Tocqueville's Virus: Utopia and Dystopia in Western Social and Political Thought* (2007) and the forthcoming *Planet Utopia: Utopia, Dystopia, Globalisation* (2014). He is also working on a third volume on contemporary utopias titled "Banal Utopias" and a monograph focused on the culture of cruelty under conditions of global capitalism.

**Malcolm Miles** is professor of cultural theory in the School of Architecture, Design and Environment at the University of Plymouth. He is author of *Eco-Aesthetics: Art, Literature, and Architecture in a Period of Climate Change* (2014), *Herbert Marcuse: An Aesthetics of Liberation* (2011), *Urban Utopias* (2008), and *Urban Avant-Gardes* (2004).