Research Note

Utopian Thinking and the Post-Pandemic Feminist Future

Abigail Raine CONNOLLY

1 Introduction

> *The pandemic highlights fissures and inequalities already existent in society but also interrupts the status quo and offers the tantalizing potential for emancipatory reconfigurations. (Wolfe, 2020, p. 2)*

In this research note I explore feminism's relationship with utopian thinking in the light of the COVID-19 pandemic. To what extent is utopian thinking a help or a hindrance to feminism?

The restrictions on movement covering most of the world (Our World in Data, 2020) have given rise to the term the 'great pause' or the even grander 'Great Pause' (see Wolfe, 2020). Imagining a better post-COVID-19 world became popular in 2020[1] . Whilst escapism is a function of utopianism (Levitas, 1990 as cited in Fernando et al., 2018), this pandemic has been seized upon by socio-political movements as an opportunity to put 'utopian' ideas into action.

It is not just academics and activists who are thinking about the post-pandemic future. On an individual level, the potential to continue working from home is attractive to some people (Cramer & Zaveri, 2020). Speaking

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[1] See the BBC's 'Rethink' series (retrieved August 26, 2020 from https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/articles/1tGpw4fG1PrfjN7Glvg2y1y/why-we-need-to-rethink-just-about-everything); the UP:IT (Utopia Platform for Imagining Transformations) project (retrieved August 26, 2020 from https://utopiaplatform.wordpress.com/); and 'The World Turned Upside Down' series in *The Guardian* (Retrieved August 26 2020 https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/series/the-world-turned-upside-down).

about the decision in August 2020 to permanently increase remote working, the chief executive of a UK bank remarked: “I wouldn’t have believed it was possible if you’d asked me in February” (Mooney et al., 2020, para. 16).

At the very moment when it seems that anything is possible, many women are less able to participate in designing a new world. Early indications are that more men than women are dying of COVID-19; but women are likely to shoulder more of the economic and social burdens of the pandemic (Wenham, 2020). In “The Coronavirus is a Disaster for Feminism,” Helen Lewis (2020) explains why:

> What do pandemic patients need? Looking after. What do self-isolating older people need? Looking after. What do children kept home from school need? Looking after. All this looking after—this unpaid caring labor—will fall more heavily on women, because of the existing structure of the workforce. (para. 6)

Gregory Claeys (2013, 2020) identifies three components of utopianism: utopian literature; utopian thought; and ‘communal movements’ or practical attempts at ‘improved communities.’ Although my focus is utopian thought and how it relates to feminist thought, I recognise how Claeys’ three components of utopianism are intertwined. Feminist utopian fiction has been a place for imagining non-patriarchal worlds. Feminist principles have been applied in practice at all levels from small-scale ‘improved communities’ to the self-named feminist governments of Sweden and Canada. Sarah Webster Goodwin (1990) insightfully describes utopianism “as an aspect of discourse, on the threshold between the fictive and real” (p. 2).

In ‘The Trouble with Utopia’ section, I outline the history and meaning of utopia, how utopias fall in and out of fashion (Kumar, 2010), and explore the fluctuating relationship between utopian and feminist discourse. In ‘The Value of Utopian Thinking’ section I turn to psychological aspects, arguing that

utopian thinking is an act that in itself has value and benefits. In the 'Utopian Realism and the End of Gender' section, I show how the concept of utopian realism is a useful way to understand how utopian thinking can lead to social change. I present postgenderism as an example of the usefulness of utopian thinking to feminism (without addressing the many complexities of postgenderism itself). I am aware this research note is very narrow in focus. I do not explore dystopias, which are closely related to utopias and are also very relevant during this time of pandemic. I have also used only sources in English from mainly European and North American writers and so my discussion of feminism comes from that perspective.

I conclude that the criticism of utopias—that they are idealistic—is precisely what makes utopian thinking so useful in imagining the world we want for ourselves, for our children and for our grandchildren. Rather than being a hindrance, utopian thinking is essential for feminism as a movement that seeks transformative social change. Finally, I recommend that we find ways to include the women who are overwhelmed with caregiving now in the utopian thinking that could shape the post-pandemic future.

2 The Trouble with Utopia

> *I am conscious that, for some people, talk of utopia represents a deeply flawed way of thinking. Utopianism, they say, at best, has an indifferent reputation, at worst, literally a bad name. (Halpin, 1999, p. 346)*

The word 'utopia' was coined by Thomas More (1478-1535) as the name for a fictional island in a book of the same name published in 1516. However, the idea of a better place in a different time or location predates writing, having existed in myths and oral traditions around the world (Claeys & Sargent, 2017, p. 6). Claeys and Sargent (2017) detail pre-*Utopia* utopias including: Judeo-Christian depictions of Eden and heaven (p. 17); the Greco-Roman myth of the

Golden Age; and Plato's *Republic*, described as an early example of "utopias of human contrivance" (p. 6).

David Halpin (1999) speculates that the root of the trouble with the concept of utopia is linguistic. Thomas More's title is "a joke" combining the Greek word 'eutopia' meaning 'good place' with 'outopia' meaning 'no place' (p. 346). The connotations of the word utopia are of an imaginary place that is not and cannot be real. In any work of fiction (including film and theatre) we suspend our disbelief or believe in the consistency of the world created by the author – even in the science fiction and fantasy genres. However, in political philosophy and in social movements (such as women's rights, peace, and climate change), the criticism of not being realistic or having so-called impossible aims can stop people from engaging, undermine credibility and ultimately prevent progress.

Although now challenged by revisionists (see Wilson, 1998 and Ashworth, 2002), the narrative of International Relations is that the 1930s and 1940s were characterised by a 'great debate' between realists and idealists (or utopians). Wilson (1998) examines *The Twenty Years' Crisis* by E. H. Carr (1892-1982) which was first published in 1939 and remains highly influential. Wilson finds that Carr created the category of idealism or utopianism to label ideas he disagreed with, as a means to discredit them. Utopianism became "a realist category of abuse" whose powerful rhetoric resulted in "a rich variety of progressive ideas" being "consigned to oblivion" (Wilson, 1998, p. 1).

However, the meaning of and popularity of utopia has varied over time (Claeys, 2020). "Utopias come in waves," rising and falling in popularity according to the socio-political context (Kapur, 2016, para. 9). Feminism also comes in waves, each one marking a progression in the narrative of the movement. The word feminism has also had periods of unpopularity with people who agree with gender equality, as explained by Toril Moi (2006) in "'I am not a Feminist, But . . .' how Feminism Became the F-Word." For now, at least, the 'F-word' has been reclaimed (see van der Gaag, 2017).

"Feminism and utopian discourse" have a long history (Goodwin, 1990); in other words, "feminists love a utopia" (Kitch, 2000, p. I). The idea of equality between men and women is present in *Republic*, so "Plato can be considered as a protofeminist" (Diamanti, 2001, p. 118). Anne Mellor (1982) reasoned that "since a gender-free society has never existed historically, feminist thinking that posits the equality of the sexes is inherently Utopian" (241). Author and academic Susan Gubar (1986) said "feminism is a form of fantasy" because it seeks to transform the way societies have been historically (p. 79). She views literary feminist utopias as a rhetorical strategy to criticise the world as it is today. Kirsten Imani Kasai (2018) goes further, seeing utopian literature as "a proven medium for proposing and evaluating social change" and "a form of intellectual activism" in itself (p. 1377).

In the late 1980s, Goodwin (1990) noticed:

> Recent feminist theory in a number of arenas has shown some discomfort with utopia; the word has appeared with increasing intensity in feminist texts, sometimes carrying a negative rather than a positive burden. Utopia seems to have lost its place, to be dislocated in the feminist universe. (p. 1)

Almost 30 years later, Imani Kasai (2018) observed how "feminists periodically abandoned utopia as a literary genre and an ideal with the potential for real-world implementation" (p. 1378).

Socio-political movements such as feminism may avoid association with idealism or utopianism because it leaves them open to criticism, including from those within the movement and potential allies. There is a perceived dichotomy between making gains today, and longer-term more idealistic goals although shocks like the COVID-19 pandemic do create opportunities for rapid social change. Philosopher Janet Radcliffe Richards has said that utopias undermine the rational thinking that "feminists need to be persuasive" and pull focus from what is possible in practice (Goodwin, 1990, p. 2). Sally Kitch (2000) finds the

utopian approach which forces us to imagine "near-perfect feminist worlds" to be impractical (p. I), arguing that feminist theory "can promote changes, . . . combat sexism, racism, homophobia, and related social injustices . . . without being utopian" (p. 111). Kitch's definition of utopias as impossible visions of perfection, coupled with her assumption that human nature determines some of the structure of society would lead to her realist conclusion. A different understanding of utopia has led other feminists to different conclusions as discussed below.

It is not within the scope of this paper to assess whether the driving influence for the rise and fall of utopian discourse within feminism is related to the wider acceptance and popularity of utopianism, or more connected to internal debates within feminism. However, the COVID-19 pandemic has sparked a renewed interest in utopian thinking and less cynicism of idealistic plans for the future. Now that it is acceptable to be utopian, will feminists accept utopia again?

3 The Value of Utopian Thinking

> *Only a crisis—actual or perceived—produces real change. When that crisis occurs, the actions that are taken depend on the ideas that are lying around. (Milton Friedman quoted in Bregman, 2020 and numerous other articles about COVID-19)*

The COVID-19 pandemic has proved that the 'impossible' can happen: clean canals in Venice; clear skies over Delhi; hotel rooms for all rough-sleepers in the UK; and a basic income scheme in Spain are a few examples (Elliott, 2020; Gov.uk, 2020; Waidler & Gavrilovic, 2020). Historically, significant changes have been implemented during times of crisis for example the USA's New Deal during the Great Depression and the UK's National Health Service established after World War II (Bregman, 2020).

Elise Boulding (1920-2010) attended a conference after World War II, where she asked a group of disarmament experts how a weapon-free world would function, how society would be and what institutions would be needed. None of the experts were able to answer. Boulding "realized that the peace movement was working on peace without knowing what a peaceful world would look like" (Portilla, 2003). This inspired her to create 'imaging workshops' where participants would imagine 30 years into the future in detail and then construct a timeline backwards to the present, a process called 'futures remembering,' followed by deciding on actions to take today (J. Boulding et al., 2016, p. 279).

Annick Wibben built on Boulding's methodology. When teaching a course on war and peace, Wibben noticed that in turning to peace in the final module, her students lacked the resources to engage with it. When she began with workshops imagining peaceful futures, it had a transformative effect: "Now my students not only see peace as possible, they also frequently comment that they find security and strategic studies' focus on spectacular violence disturbing and thereafter identify it as part of the problem throughout the course" (Wibben et al., 2018, p.101). Wibben (2020) has also led "envisaging feminist futures" workshops where a group imagines "the end point" and then "backcast" (what Boulding called 'futures remembering') to what needs to happen now.

Boulding advised that people do "their own personal imaging" because "knowing what you are working for affects your choices and what you do now" (Portilla, 2003). This 'personal imaging' closely resembles what I have experienced and witnessed during workplace coaching. Coaching is based on neuro-linguistic programming theory which says that if we keep focusing on a problem, our brains will be unable to imagine solutions. One coaching tool is the GROW model which stands for Goal, Reality, Options, Way forward (Alexander, 2010). The coachee is guided to imagine their ideal situation if there were no obstacles to achieving it, and to describe what they would feel like in that ideal situation. By putting 'Goal' before 'Reality' in coaching sessions,

coachees are often able to realise what they truly want, be ambitious in their goals, and feel motivated to take action. It is an exercise in everyday utopian thinking.

Fernando et al. (2018) conducted three studies on the psychological effect of utopian thinking in the lives of 'ordinary people' using the framework developed by Ruth Levitas that "imagining one's utopia may result in the motivation to engage in change, criticism, or escape behaviors" (Levitas, 1990, as cited in Fernando et al., 2018, p. 781). Rather than resulting in escapism and avoidance, the authors concluded that "engaging with an ideal society, utopia" tends to motivate people to be involved in social change (p. 789).

In an interview with *The New Yorker*, Judith Butler explained the damaging effect of 'reality' in socio-political discourse (Gessen, 2020). Her example is the claim that a woman being elected as President of the USA is unrealistic. Whether that statement is true or not, it functions to confirm that version of reality: "To stay within the framework of Realpolitik is, I think, to accept a closing down of horizons, a way to seem 'cool' and skeptical at the expense of radical hope and aspiration" (Butler interviewed by Gessen, 2020, para. 14). Butler repeatedly describes utopian thinking as appearing "crazy" because she knows the criticisms her call for non-violence and "radical equality" will attract. Nonetheless, she stands by her utopian thinking: "Sometimes you have to imagine in a radical way that makes you seem a little crazy . . . in order to open up a possibility that others have already closed down with their knowing realism" (para. 15).

4 Utopian Realism and the End of Gender

> *By "utopian realism", I mean an attitude to the state of the world that is realistic (e.g. attainable, likely) in the long term. . . . A utopian realist, then, is one who takes the long view, who has the courage to fight for desirable ideas and states of affairs (no matter how their short-term prospects look like), and who has the*

insight that the status quo is just a passing phenomenon. (Tønnessen, 2013)

Feminists who utilise utopian thinking need to make clear how they define it and build a defence of utopian thinking itself so that their feminist arguments are not undermined (see Risman et al., 2012; Nicholas, 2014; Risman, 2018 and Butler interviewed by Gessen, 2020). Feminists have experience of this in their defence of feminist methodology and epistemology. Feminist research is associated with qualitative methods, knowledge grounded in experience and challenging the assumed need for objectivity and neutrality (see Westmarland, 2001; Hussain & Asad, 2012). These methods have been criticised as "unscientific", "ideological" or "biased" (Eichler, 1980 quoted in Cook, 1983, p. 127), but feminists have pushed back and sought credibility.

There is no set definition of utopia, meaning we can make it what we need it to be. Claeys (2013) argues that the everyday understanding of utopia "as an idealized future or past, or non-existent ideal society" is not useful in political thought or practice because it is too broad to be meaningful (p. 147).

Collin Anthony (2017) identified three dichotomies prevalent in political philosophy: "realism vs. utopianism, ideal vs. nonideal theory, and fact-sensitivity vs. fact-insensitivity" (p. 1). He argues that the realistic utopia concept put forward by John Rawls (1921-2002) is a framework which resolves those dichotomies with "a vision of society that is utopian, yet is still realistically achievable" (Anthony, 2017, p. 1). Rawls saw "political philosophy as realistically utopian: that is, as probing the limits of practicable political possibility" (Anthony, 2017, p. 4). Like Boulding, Rawls encourages us not to be constrained in our thinking of what is possible, by perceived obstacles or by historical failures. Halpin (1999) defines utopian realism as an "application of the utopian imagination" (p. 345) which "does not exhibit the sort of characteristics frequently associated with some utopias by critics who consider them naïve, fanciful and impractical" (p. 346).

Allowing people to free their minds of obstacles and imagine utopias or

ideal futures does not necessarily result in impossible fantasies. Wibben (2019) noted that her students in the USA often imagined free higher education which does exist in Europe, and that ideas now accepted as normal such as childcare centres “have their origins in utopian thinking” (pp. 102-103). Boulding advised those in the peace movement to “remember that what exists is possible” meaning that if something has happened somewhere at some time (her example was overcoming conflicts) then it is possible, “in a way, it is a basic statement of fact” (Portilla, 2003).

Boulding’s concept of a ‘200-year present’ is relevant to utopian realism. The 200-year present stretches 100 years into the past (because today someone is celebrating their 100th birthday) and 100 years into the future (because today someone is being born who will live for 100 years). The COVID-19 pandemic is often described as ‘unprecedented’ but people who experienced the 1918 influenza pandemic are alive today. Boulding understood that “the wisdom of those who had devised practical solutions to past problems could be tapped and shared with those making decisions in the present” (Boulding, J. R. et al., 2016, p. 279).

The connection between gender norms and gender inequality is strong and the COVID-19 pandemic is exacerbating it (Oxfam International, 2020). The social norm of caregiving being ‘female’ and the social stratification which values masculine attributes above feminine ones, is the context in which women are disproportionately affected by the negative socio-economic impacts of the pandemic (Lewis, 2020; Oxfam International, 2020; Wenham et al., 2020).

Gender norms dominate commentary on the success of political leaders in responding to COVID-19, but the social stratification is reversed with ‘feminine’ attributes of empathy and collaboration elevated over ‘masculine,’ aggressive leaders:

> Ardern, Merkel, Frederiksen, and Tsai Ing-Wen of Taiwan have emphasized compassion and patience, rather than war and victory. They

> have not posed as commanders dispatching brave conscripts off to the front, but rather as mothers and daughters sharing the fears and privations of their fellow citizens. (Bell, 2020, para. 12)

A study by Garikipati and Kambhampati (2020) found COVID-19 outcomes are better in countries led by women, offering explanations based on literature on gender difference in behaviour. Whilst a handful of female leaders may be helping to flip the narrative on the social stratification of masculine and feminine attributes, the discourse remains stuck in a masculine/feminine binary. Given the harm caused, not only to women, by gender norms and gender inequality, it makes sense to question the utility of gender as a category at all. Utopian thinking helps us to do that.

My intention in this research note is not to examine the concept of postgenderism or the debates within it, but to use postgenderism as an example of how utopian thinking is important for progressing feminist thought. Postgenderism is a diverse movement, in this research note I use the term to broadly mean the absence of gender as a social category. Utopian realist thinking is a very useful tool to explore what a post-gender world would look like and how it would function.

Lucy Nicholas (2014) argues that we need to be able to imagine the absence of gender as a category in order to be able to analyse gender successfully. Utopian fiction has explored many possibilities in relation to sex and gender. If a post-gender world is hard to imagine, we can go back to Boulding's assertion that if something has existed at some time or place, it is possible. For example, until the early twentieth century in the USA young children were dressed according to age, not gender, and toys were more gender-neutral (Davis, 2020).

Barbara Risman and Judith Lorber find the classification "of some human attributes as masculine and some as feminine" results in oppression as "these attributes and behaviors are not equally valued or rewarded" (Risman et al.,

2012, p. 4). The gender norm of caregiving and carework as a female endeavor which is unpaid, unnoticed or undervalued by society is the perfect example. Their:

> utopian vision for gender equality asks feminists to continue the social movement towards what may seem like an impossible dream—a world where people are not forced to live constrained inside one gender, where expectations for interaction are not based on gender identity, and where work and family are organized to combine productive paid work with the unpaid work of social reproduction. While it is true that most can hardly imagine a society with such freedom, our goal here is to create such a vision, to help free the imagination. (Risman et al., 2012, p. 25)

Risman (2018) expands on her "utopian vision" and "call for a fourth wave of feminism" (p. 308). Her aim is to translate the utopian vision into a "social movement to dismantle gender" and proposes a strategy (p. 310). Utopian realism has clearly been central in enabling Risman to advance her thinking and connect it to social action.

5 Conclusion

> *Historically, pandemics have forced humans to break with the past and imagine their world anew. This one is no different. It is a portal, a gateway between one world and the next. (Roy, 2020)*

Having looked at the ways in which utopia is problematic for socio-political movements, I conclude that utopian thinking is a highly effective and valuable tool for social change. Feminists should not be deterred by the sometime unpopularity of utopianism. We should embrace the long relationship between feminist and utopian discourse and defend utopian thinking in the way that

they have defended feminist research methodologies. The COVID-19 pandemic has generated renewed enthusiasm for utopian realist thinking, for imagining futures with the intent of putting plans into action. The pandemic has highlighted that gender norms around the 'femaleness' of caregiving contribute to gender inequality which is harmful not only to women and girls but to all of society.

In the short term, the pandemic is eroding gains made by feminism over decades. But gender inequality is now in the spotlight. How are we to take advantage of this 'leapfrog opportunity' when during the pandemic, many women have less time to participate in social change? Female academics are publishing less during the pandemic (Amano-Patiño et al., 2020). Clare Wenham, lead author of an influential article in *The Lancet* about the gendered effects of the pandemic, was interrupted by her daughter during a live news interview - unintentionally demonstrating her point (BBC News, 2020). Economist Kate Raworth has one of the great 'ideas lying around,' 'Doughnut Economics', but posted on her blog:

> The need for new economic thinking is more evident than ever. I'm planning a series of video blogs exploring the coronavirus crisis through the lens of Doughnut Economics, but am struggling to find the time to get started—between working, homeschooling, housework, community care, and sleep. (2020, para. 2)

Gender norms around caregiving underpin societies and economies where simply being female is a disadvantage. For many women, the COVID-19 pandemic is not a 'great pause' or a time for reflection. Caring responsibilities are overwhelming, time is scarce (see Connolly, 2020). Utopian thinking is a powerful tool for designing a post-pandemic feminist future. However, we must be proactive in finding ways to involve time-poor women in imagining our ideal world.

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Abstract

ユートピア的思考とパンデミック後のフェミニストの未来

アビゲイル・レイン・コノリ

本研究ノートでは、新型コロナウィルスのパンデミックによって引き起こされた「グレート・ポーズ」（大休止）という文脈の中で、ユートピア的思考とフェミニズムの関係を探求する。取り上げる研究課題は、「ユートピア的思考はフェミニズムにとってどの程度の助けになるのか、あるいは妨げになるのか」ということである。ユートピアという言葉や概念がしばしば不評を買いながらも、2020年にはパンデミック後の未来を想像するという主流の活動の一部となっていることを、ユートピアの歴史を振り返りながら検証する。ユートピアとフェミニストの両言説の関係、また、時にフェミニストがユートピアと距離を取っていたことを考察する。文献やいくつかのメディアの情報源を調査し、ユートピア的思考が人々にとって自分たちの生活を改善し、社会変革を実現するための貴重なツールであることを明らかにする。ユートピア的リアリズムは、理想的な未来を想像する力と、今日の具体的な行動とを接続させることを可能とする。ポストジェンダリズムは、ユートピア的思考がフェミニストの言説にとっていかに価値のあるものであるかを示す一例である。本研究では、フェミニズムが進化し、境界線を押し広げ続けるためには、ユートピア的思考が不可欠であると結論づける。最後に、新型コロナウィルスのパンデミックによって生み出された余分なケアワークを女性・女子が引き受けるという期待を生じさせているジェンダー規範が、ジェンダー平等やポストジェンダーのフェミニストな未来を構想することをより困難にしている点に焦点を当てる。 今後の研究では、時間に追われる女性がユートピア思考に参加しうる方法を検討することを提案したい。

キーワード：

ユートピア、フェミニズム、ジェンダー、新型コロナウィルス、ポストジェンダリズム