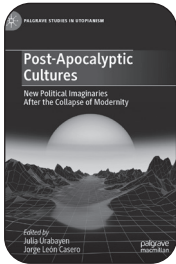# THE DEBRIS OF POLITICAL PROJECTS: UTOPIA IN NEED OF A REWIRE

Julia Urabayen, Jorge León Casero (eds.), *Post-Apocalyptic Cultures: New Political Imaginaries After the Collapse of Modernity*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2024

Abstract: The text aims at providing a theoretical reflection on Utopian thinking that could spotlight the wider relevance of the volume *Post-Apocalyptic Cultures: New Political Imaginaries After the Collapse of Modernity*, edited by Julia Urabayen and Jorge León Casero. Additionally, the theoretical frame allows for a red thread to be uncovered, unveiling the unifying concerns that run throughout this collection of distinguishable chapters signed by authors with diverse backgrounds. The proposed red thread is the visionary utopian or dystopian embeddedness of the individual in systems, networks or overarching structures that accommodate distinct degrees of agency, a topic that has stirred up a rich body of cultural works or social projects which come under scrutiny in the thought-provoking texts of this volume.
Keywords: Utopia; Rationalization; Politics and Imagination; Agency, Alternative; Anxiety.

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There are multifaceted routes of anxiety that structure and de-structure Utopian thinking, in the attempt to align the bracketed present with a sought-out practical or imaginary distancing from it. I will choose one such route, synthetically grasped, in order to understand the development of an underlying affect accompanying the imaginary of ends, alternatives and transmutations. One of Western modernity's founding myths is that of the rationalization of society. The demystification brought about by scientific discoveries, the introduction of bureaucracy into government and the spread of capitalism marks the dawn of a new perception about the relation between the individual and the organizational settings that safeguard and contain the subject. In an optimistic perspective, that views bureaucratization as the successful realization of an autonomous system which is not governed by personal interest, favor and emotion, Max Weber describes the bureaucratic machine as indestructible, as it turns 'community action' into 'societal action'[1]. In more 'apocalyptic' terms, Weber talks about the apparatus as "an ever-moving mechanism"[2] that prescribes the individual bureaucrat to his predetermined activity. This is not only related to the industrial anxiety of being part of a mechanism, but more connected to the idea of being engulfed by a system the individual has no control over or a system that excludes individual traces. The dystopian anxiety ingrained in the negation of the individual and the affirmation of the

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dis-invested, neutral power of the 'societal' has nurtured apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic projections, making readers critically engage with ideas such as the unlimited power of institutions, governments, technology or the relation between the socio-culturally divided layers of the social organism. The fear of hyper-specialization, control and the comfort of predictability were all seen as the flip-side story of rationality or, as George Ritzer termed it when referring to the optimization principles of the "fast-food" society, "the irrationality of rationality."[3] At the other endpoint of the stick, Jürgen Habermas sees modern societies as "a-centric societies,"[4] meaning as fragmentary ensembles which cannot be totalized or integrated into a higher-order system: "the lifeworld has disintegrated without remainder into the functionally specialized subsystems such as economy, state, education, science, etc."[5] In both indestructible, hierarchical systems and hyper-specialized separated subsystems, what is at stake is the ways in which experience and knowledge are composed and diffused by these mechanisms that confine human action and the apprehension of time-frames that are bound to these systems as well. The reflection on the systematization and organization of individual and collective life is deeply entwined with the borders of Utopian thinking and our perception about its effectiveness or superfluousness. In my opinion, Utopian thinking dismantles the systems and frames, seeking out to understand the thresholds that marks the transformation of the individual into the collective, or, as David Grossman puts it, those moments in which the individual "hands over parts of himself to mass control."[6]

In order to delve into the collective volume *Post-Apocalyptic Cultures: New Political Imaginaries After the Collapse of Modernity* (2024), edited by Julia Urabayen and Jorge León Casero, I deemed the above political understanding of utopia to be relevant, as it breaks down the core dichotomy of Utopian thinking: the antagonistic positions of the subject in relation to his mediated reality and agency. Navigating "information apocalypse", the articulation of postselves, techno-utopian dreams, "communicational abnormalities"[7] (such as *hyperstition*, alternate facts, disinformation etc.), narratives shaped and promoted by algorithms that take over, decolonial post-utopias, generative digital archives, symbiogenetic models and many other topics, the volume covers a wide variety of themes and scenarios. All of these diverse topics are related to the political imaginary, in an attempt to map out the galvanizing forces of collapse in the midst of each instituted project of reality. As Robert T. Tally Jr. puts it, in his referential work *Utopia in the Age of Globalization: Space, Representation, and the World-System*, "the utopian impulse reflects an effort to situate oneself in space and in history, imaginatively projecting a world that enables one to represent the apparently unrepresentable totality of the world system."[8] Projections of totality and the resistance embedded in these totalizing efforts with or without rest are those that fascinate the authors of the collective volume, sowing the seeds of an awareness that could anticipate social and political action. Our relation to such projected centralized or de-centralized, complete or incomplete totalities conjures the imaginary and fuels the indispensable conflict of interpretations that cuts

through the indivisibility of shared spaces and asserts the urgency to understand 'togetherness' in revolutionary new ways. Frederic Jameson sees the political dimension of postmodernism in its capacity to give rise to the "invention and projection of a global cognitive mapping, on a social as well as a spacial scale."[9] *Post–Apocalyptic Cultures: New Political Imaginaries After the Collapse of Modernity* (2024), that is part of the Palgrave Studies in Utopianism Series, edited by Gregory Claeys, seems to live up to the challenge of exploring this need of grasping the cognitive maps of totalities that can be so disorienting for the global citizen at the crossroads (the best visual depiction of this metaphor was conveyed by Diego Rivera in his commissioned and later destroyed fresco Man at the Crossroads). In the *Preface*, the editors argue that utopianism is no longer articulated as a loose, imaginative 'future in sight' that can help us harbor the hope of new political projects. Instead, it feeds itself from "the impossibility of generating new political projects from the ruins of the apocalypse that has begun."[10] Overall, the volume does not succumb to the hegemonic apocalyptic discourse, although it manages to stress the disconcerting frames that blur the line between individual agency and mediated proliferation. The volume is extremely vast in its take and this is the reason why it would be more appropriate to briefly discuss each contribution separately.

Jorge León Casero looks into the relation between different philosophical conceptualizations of the properties, functions of matter/nature and the direct consequences of these dichotomous perspectives in terms of human action and political design. The split between the two distinct views, *natura naturans* (which implies a degree of self-awareness of nature) and *natura naturata* (which subsumes nature to human action), is traced back to Giordano Bruno's vitalist conception of Nature and Francis Bacon's reduction of nature to a domain of the human subject. Casero delves into the vitalist philosophical materialisms that started questioning the non-vitalist conception of matter (natura naturata) beginning with the mid 20th century. Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela defy the 'producer and product' model of perception and knowledge, coining the term autopoiesis, which does not situate the biological roots of knowing in the subject, but at the level of the inseparable unity between living beings and the environment. Ernst Bloch has a similar holistic perspective that underlies "the need to develop an «alliance technique» with nature in which the former does not function or conceive itself as an external agent to the latter"[11] Deleuze and Guattari's communicative assemblages between human and non-human point towards a complex relation between man and nature, which is informed by "a process that produces the one within the other." (p. 10) These views are contrasted by "a planetary-scale geoengineering process" (Benjamin Bratton) (p. 13) that would embody the apocalyptic dystopia of automation.

R. R. Ortiz takes a different understanding of utopia underlined by a desire to escape a totalizing and oppressive world through dreams, images, travel experiences etc. In this light, the utopia of democratization, empowerment, heterogeneity and participation that accompanies digital technology is also seen as a form of submission to the digital dynamics that prescribe

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us to certain ways of consuming information and narratives. Thus, in cyber-utopianism, "prosumers face the monetarization of human relations, the appropriation of all signs that become data" (p. 33)

Analysing Songdo and Masdar as examples of utopian smart cities, Enrique Cano-Suñén and José María Castejón question the model of sustainable cities promoted by the neoliberal mainstream. Besides the high fossil-fuel-derived energy costs for maintaining these "paradisiacal retreats" in the middle of the desert, the utopia of the smart city is not functional also due to the fact that the city is projected as an autonomous closed system, instead of being conceived "as sympoietic, open, and interdependent String Figures of matter, energy, information, and socio-symbolic relationships." (p. 52)

Andoni Alonso and Iñaki Arzoz trace the emergence of Utopian Studies as a discipline back to the 1970s, with the movements generated by the need to imagine new societies in the thriving economic period of technological development. The failure of these political proposals also brought about new challenges regarding the ways in which we conceive the role of imagination on the brink of collapse. "If a new utopia is possible, it must be based on technology. If it comes from a philosophical or literary origin, it is simply gibberish." (p. 59) The authors argue for a reconsideration of this technological determination and for a special attention being dedicated to the pragmatic effects of imaginary spaces that could help us "break free from the confines of the digital bubble and forge a path towards a more just, equitable, and sustainable future." (p. 69) The story (and its adaptations) in Shakespeare's

The Tempest is employed in order to metaphorically understand the appropriation between magical thinking and the transformative effects of cultural and aesthetic performativity.

Ayazhan Sagikyzy and Anar Uyzbayeva look into the debate (humanism vs antihumanism) behind "the necessity for human *perfection*" (p. 78) and immortalism. After a thorough analysis of alternatives to anthropocentrism, the authors conclude that transhumanism is "a hidden antihumanism" and that we need "to humanize the current socio-cultural reality" (p. 92) through a process of humanization that is not anthropocentric.

Anna Bugajska looks into postmortalism and possibilities of life extension, arguing that immortality technologies also function as political mechanisms designed to enhance the collective self-hood through a prolongation of memory and imagination. Postselves (digital selves recreated from datasets) can be subjected to manipulation as they fall into "the patterns of digital biopolitics," (p. 104) thus raising questions about the set of rights connected to dispersed identity.

Julia Urabayen deals with feminist utopias (late 19th and early 20th century), investigating the empowering and liberating effects of biopolitics (for women) in these stories. The idea put forward is that weapons such as hyper-rationalization, social control and eugenics do free women from the confinements of an industrial, catastrophic and male-dominated environment, but they generate a social apparatus in which personal growth, individual choices and self-determination become obsolete. Thus, this concealment of individual will inside institutionalized

technocratic power betrays modernity's lack of confidence in a technically orchestrated idea of progress.

Corin Braga focuses on a corpus of contemporary critical dystopias, depicting a break with modern dystopias (such as Evgheni Zamyatin or George Orwell) in terms of a staging of the sense of hope related to the future that determines the pursuit of characters in these narratives. Thus, the main characters (usually groups of survivors) are expected to walk the labyrinth of anxieties and "restore the situation from before the collapse of civilization" (p. 138) by breaking the structures of the oppressive systems and "open the gates of the dystopian cities." (p. 144) This envisioning of a way out of dystopia corresponds to "rites of passage" that explore the contemporary challenges of young age such as the need of self-expression and the encounter of new social environments.

Drawing on the genealogy of Islamic apocalyptic writings, Yehosua Frenkel seeks to understand how the reception of modern dystopias has been informed by the former. Arab science-fiction writing emerged in the 1940s against a backdrop of turmoil and urbanization. These fictional works introduced their readership into the imaginary of "the other world" of modernity; an optimistic vision channeled by an idea of progress harbored by both conservatives and liberals. Moreover, these modern dystopias point to the interesting dynamics of a network of reception marked by the split between the West and the East, and between traditional eschatological views and universalized ones.

Rawad Alhashmi facilitates access to an Arab SF novel of Egyptian author Nihad Sharif, *The Inhabitants of the Second World* (1977), which has not made it into English translation yet. The innovative aspect of the fictional work is that it envisions a democratic, humanistic cosmopolitan utopia founded by a group of pacifist multinational scholars and scientists, reflecting the idea of *convivencia* (peaceful coexistence) and care for the environment. This novel is unique in Arab/Islamic utopianism, mostly due to the ways in which in tackles global issues and optimistic fraternal-cosmopolitan design of the future.

Angela Yiu analyzes the censored novel of Chinese writer Yan Lianke, *Serve the People!* (2005) from the perspective of its political subversiveness. The novel centers on the inversion of political slogans from Mao's "Little Red Book", throughout the sexual affair of the protagonists. According to the author, the triumph over the system through laughter and sex is only illusory as the main characters are both marionettes in the Division Commander's carefully designed plan to produce an heir. The subversiveness of the novel lies not in its ability to generate laughter, but "in its challenge to a dystopic prison built not of bricks and violence but the tyranny of words that demands absolute obedience." (p. 200)

Javier Cuestas-Caza looks into the role played by the Global South in imagining and in putting forth alternatives to Western global capitalism. The concepts of *Sumak Kawsay* and *Buen-Vivir*, introduced in the Ecuadorian Constitution of 2005, outline a decolonial post-utopia rooted in the "attempt to *delink* from the logic of subalternization" and "the *relinking* with dissent glocal knowledge and practices." (p. 205) The fact that this emancipatory political project comes from "the coloniality of knowledge" (p. 214) is one of the main

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arguments of its legitimacy and contemporary relevance.

Ana Peraica explores *the utopia of the archive* as a technoutopian dream, coining the concept of *phototopia*. Photography and photomontage have played a major role in genetics and biometrics, with the composite images created by Sir Francis Galton being used to appreciate facial patterns of criminality. Whilst these methods were designed to map out the biological legacy of social categories, computer artists are looking for other forms of meaningful geographies based on data computation. With the capacity of processing a larger number of images and datasets, we might be tempted to praise the reliability and neutrality of such instruments, but the author warns us that we are not yet free from bias as "the data is still partial." (p. 235)

Daniel Panka stretches the concept of "information apocalypse" to discuss its two divergent meanings: an overload of unfiltered information and the apocalypse of a lack of information. Drawing on *The Private Eye* (2013) by Brian K. Vaughan, Panka analyses the shortcomings of imagining a future without digital surveillance, where the flow of information is disrupted and people hide "behind facedes." (p. 247) The debate about surveillance should focus on how to make these enabling technologies "more equitable, accountable, and less exploitative." (p. 246)

Focusing on contemporary cinema, Mónica Martín argues that the collapse of patriarchal-capitalist orders portrayed in the referenced films, where "the social body emerges as a menace to control or shield oneself from," (p. 258) ignites a counter-imanginary of hope and transformation. "Patriarchal realism" is under siege

in these apocalyptic depictions, urging us (the viewers) to lift the curtain of 'creative' destruction and demand a more community-oriented, and less heroic, individual-centered, inspirational scenario for the future.

Paul Graham Raven seeks to illustrate the idea that "creative practice" (seen as a form of activism) can provide the necessary frames for an alternative to the neo-liberal TINA (There Is No Alternative). In other words, what Mark Fisher termed "capitalist realism" can be overcome by fostering "utopian flames," (p. 273) in the sense of "developing a new postcapitalist desire" (p. 285) as *praxis* and mode of being.

In conclusion, the spark of the volume lies not in its critique of the ways in which the world tackles its crises through an apocalyptic imaginary, but in its capacity to insinuate an *anagnorisis*, meaning the realization/revelation that the future is already in ruins and that this calls for a renewed framework ethics of transformation. As we were able to decipher from a quick overview of the volume, the contemporary dystopian anxiety is no longer bound to a lack of trust in state-structure, as evoked at the beginning, but rather to a concern regarding the lack of structure or system that could help us find the cohesion that we need to observe a totality and take a leap of faith into 'utopian' creative alternatives. The transnational, cross-cultural investigation of Utopian thinking, including the concerns for a structural disintegration or construction of the 'future', proves to be both enlarging and multifaceted, leaving us pondering the (im)possible reconciliation between distinct manifestations of agency and post-apocalyptic initiatives. The various dreams of transcendence, transition,

returns and 're-birth' (after collapse) need to be understood against the backdrop of the agonizing struggle for finding an over-riding, imaginary way out of the hegemonic logic of neoliberal capitalism. Thus, the cultural products and discourses that make the study object of these chapters, could point towards new readings of the contemporary present's background narratives of exhaustion and depletion.

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NOTES

1. Max Weber, *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, trans. and edited by H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills, New York: Oxford University Press, 1946, p. 228.
2. *Ibidem*.
3. George Ritzer, *The McDonaldization of Society: An Investigation into the Changing Character of Contemporary Social Life*, Pine Forge Press, 1993.
4. Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Twelve Lectures*, trans. by Frederick Lawrence, Cambridge: Polity Press, 1987, p. 357.
5. *Ibidem*, p. 358.
6. David Grossman, *Writing in the Dark*, trans. by Jessica Cohen, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2008, p. 52.
7. Julia Urabayen, Jorge León Casero (eds.), *Post-Apocalyptic Cultures: New Political Imaginaries After the Collapse of Modernity*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2024, p. 65.
8. Robert T. Tally Jr., *Utopia in the Age of Globalization: Space, Representation, and the World-System*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013, p. ix.
9. Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Durham: Duke University Press, 1991, p. 54.
10. Julia Urabayen, Jorge León Casero (eds.), *op. cit.*, p. vi.
11. *Ibidem*, p. 8.