



No other planet: Utopian visions for a climate-changed world

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Nobody wants to think about climate change but everybody knows there is nothing else to think about. As greenhouse gas emissions continue to rise, every political problem is a climate problem. Yet though we can see disaster approaching, we seem unable to take action to avoid it. This combination of knowledge and inaction makes it easy to catastrophize; the status quo seems both unsustainable and impossible to change.

Enter Mathias Thaler's *No Other Planet: Utopian Visions for a Climate Changed World*, which shows the importance of utopian thinking for helping us through this crisis. Thaler's creative, original, and interdisciplinary book self-consciously draws on work in political theory, utopian studies, and environmental humanities to argue that we need both utopian theorizing and utopian storytelling if we are to imagine a future beyond our present impasse. The planetary scale of climate change presents a particular challenge to politics and makes plain the need for great imaginative resources beyond our familiar repertoire of political ideas. As Thaler puts it, 'it is the scale and intricacy of the Anthropocene, the immensity of imagining a climate-changed world, that makes it imperative for us to strive for orientation with the help of various utopian visions' (p. 24). Thaler persuasively argues that such utopias are crucial if we are to address our circumstances squarely and 'liberate ourselves simultaneously from the incapacitating grip of ecological grief and from the delusional obsession with... "solutionism"' (p. 5).

Thaler advances his case in six chapters. The first two chapters are methodological. Drawing on Miguel Abensour, Thaler defines utopianism broadly as the 'education of a desire for being and living otherwise' (p. 3). Against the objections that utopianism is either useless or dangerous, Thaler argues that it is essential for helping navigate unjust social circumstances. Contrary to familiar

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assumptions, Thaler argues that ‘the education of desire can proceed without static images of an alluring future’ (p. 216). Instead, he sees utopianism operating on a different register—primarily by ‘estranging, galvanizing, and cautioning’ (p. 5). By educating our desire in this way, Thaler’s utopianism is not opposed to realism but offers imagined futures in the service of illuminating the present through ‘a kind of double vision’ (p. 220).

But this double vision is hard to maintain. Indeed, Thaler argues its failure is inevitable; rather than try to avoid it, we should embrace multiple utopias that can act as correctives of each other. He writes, ‘Indeterminacy, wishful thinking and defeatism are not incidental byproducts of the utopian desire; they are intrinsic to conjuring anti-perfectionist scenarios of the future that critically interrogate the present’ (p. 292). Thaler identifies these ‘fault lines’ or ‘breaking points’ in utopian visions so that we can make use of them while conscious of where they are likely to fail (p. 281).

Accordingly, the book’s middle chapters identify the fault lines in three different utopian mechanisms, drawn from a taxonomy of plotlines identified by Octavia Butler. *What-If* plots defamiliarize the world, enabling us to see it anew but also potentially estranging us in ways that don’t lead to action. By contrast, *If-Only* plots can mobilize us but at the risk of encouraging wishful thinking. Finally, *If-This-Goes-On* plots can serve as warnings that identify real approaching perils but at the risk of producing defeatism.

Interestingly and importantly, though these forms of emplotment are drawn from fiction, Thaler applies them to political theorizing. These chapters productively pair more explicitly theoretical or political texts with works of speculative fiction, illuminating how these different kinds of texts can educate desire in similar and complementary ways. Chapter 3 considers the Gaia Hypothesis, first as developed by James Lovelock and then as taken up by Bruno Latour before turning to the *Broken Earth* trilogy by N. K. Jemisin. According to Thaler, ‘the notion that our planet is alive, an actor in its own right’ (p. 97) helps us imagine new forms of agency beyond entrenched dichotomies between the human and non-human but ultimately ‘ends up eclipsing reflections about what should be done concretely, here and now’ (p. 145).

To educate desire in a more action-oriented way, Chapter 4 turns to *If-Only* utopias in the form of ecomodernisms of the right and left, represented by Steven Pinker and a special issue of *Jacobin*, before analyzing Kim Stanley Robinson’s *Science in the Capital* trilogy. Here the aim is to educate desire to avoid ‘exacerbating feelings of fatalistic resignation about climate change’ (p. 211), though such determined efforts to impel hope can push too far into wishful thinking.

Such wishful thinking is in turn chastened by the *If-This-Goes-On* dystopias analyzed in Chapter 5, which caution against confidence that we are prepared for what is coming. Thaler analyzes a range of political texts, including Roy Scranton’s *Learning How to Die in the Anthropocene* and Paul Kingsnorth and Dougald Hine’s *Uncivilisation: The Dark Mountain Manifesto*. He praises these texts for demolishing false hopes but faults them for lapsing into ‘decidedly apolitical memory-making’ instead of making their reflections available ‘to be reinscribed into social struggles that are already under way’ (p. 248). Thaler traces some similar dynamics at work in Margaret Atwood’s *MaddAddam* trilogy, though he concludes that all these



texts are helpful for ‘thinking through the cataclysm as a preventative exercise in cognitive and affective resilience’ (p. 280).

As this overview suggests, *No Other Planet* covers an enormous amount of ground, drawing from an admirably wide range of texts and showing an impressive mastery of multiple literatures. This fits the book’s focus on the education of desire, since there are so many channels through which desire might be educated. It’s also an important way of decentering traditional approaches to political theory, showing that other ways of engaging with politics may illuminate our present circumstances better than the familiar tools of abstraction and generalization. In that way, the book is an exemplar of problem-driven interdisciplinarity and a model of how theorists can and should make use of cultural resources to understand our world.

However, the book also sometimes exhibits interdisciplinarity’s fault lines, as it occasionally becomes entangled in issues that—at least to the political theorist—feel tangential to the central argument, as when a section is devoted to the question, ‘Should the Science Fiction/Fantasy Distinction Be Abolished?’ (pp. 119–123). Thaler notes, ‘we have seen how intricate the notion of utopianism as the education of desire actually is’ (p. 96), and sometimes I wished the book was less intricate and made starker claims. To use the language of orientation: sometimes when you’re lost in the forest, being oriented requires detailed information about the trees surrounding you, but other times, you just want to be reminded which way is north.

Let me mention two further ways the book’s account might be developed to orient us better. The first concerns its account of how speculative fiction educates desire. Thaler writes, ‘Via character-driven plot lines that intensify experiential texture and depth, storytelling in the Anthropocene enables the reader to navigate a perplexing future, which in turn sheds light on the present moment’ (p. 285). I worry that this focus on plot as way of adding depth to experience scants other ways that fiction can engage desire. Formal and aesthetic qualities can also shape orientation, creating moods and producing friction with prevailing forms of experience. The book’s omission of these is particularly striking since Thaler begins and ends with discussions of Robert Musil’s *The Man Without Qualities*—a masterpiece of modernist fiction which is far from plot-driven. Musil’s protagonist Ulrich introduces a distinction between a rationalist ‘utopia of precision’ and a more sentiment-centered ‘utopia of essayism’; Thaler sees the latter as ‘especially promising’ for his project (p. 294). Yet the book’s tendency to reduce fiction to plot, and its persistent interest in taxonomizing utopias, sometimes works at cross purposes to this and betrays a fondness for the utopia of precision that characterizes so much contemporary philosophy.

Finally, though Thaler describes three sites of utopianism—political and social theory; fictional narratives; and social movements and experiments in communal living (p. 7)—actual political practices are largely not discussed. Political texts are considered discursively and not in connection to the experience of political action and whatever utopian moment it might contain. In that way, Thaler’s criticism of eco-pessimists like Scranton for failing to connect to really existing social movements might also be applied to *No Other Planet*. While Thaler sees *If-Only* utopias galvanizing us to action, the book does not engage with questions about the strategy and tactics for confronting fossil capital, leaving it unclear what action we ought to be galvanized to. Thaler persuasively writes, ‘Far from succumbing to escapism



wishful thinking or totalitarian social engineering, utopianism sets into motion a critical and transformative interrogation of the present that bridges the imagination and action' (p. 51), yet the bridge Thaler has built does not always quite span this gap.

Nevertheless, Thaler has initiated an important project that I hope he and others will continue. We are urgently in need of imaginative approaches to the climate crisis and *No Other Planet* offers both an outstanding guide to existing utopian efforts and a model for how political theorists might join them.

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