

INAUGURAL 6

THE IMAGINARY RECONSTITUTION OF  
SOCIETY

or

why sociologists and others should take utopia more  
seriously

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In William Morris's 1890 utopia *News from Nowhere*, there is a very short chapter, 'Concerning Politics'. The visitor, William Guest, asks his informant 'How do you manage with politics?'. He receives the reply '... we are very well off as to politics, - because we have none.' This lecture is about the relationship between sociology and utopia, and some might expect it to be equally brief, and for the same reason, that there is none.

H. G. Wells, however, whose *A Modern Utopia* was published a hundred years ago this year, thought otherwise. He argued that:

... the creation of utopias – and their exhaustive criticism – is the proper and distinctive method of sociology (Wells 1914: 204)

This is counter-intuitive. Sociology, surely, is a discipline of social *science*, and even those who doubt its scientific credentials, or question the meaning of scientificity itself would argue that it offers thick description and explanation of reality, of what *IS*. Utopia, on the other hand, is essentially about what is *not*, and what *ought to be*. The only relationship between the two that would seem to make sense, therefore, is a *sociology of utopia*, in which sociology is the master narrative explaining the various forms and expressions of utopianism in relation to their social context. Wells's statement implies something else – that we must consider *sociology as utopia*, and *utopia as sociology*.

I shall argue that Wells was right. A utopian method, *The Imaginary Reconstitution of Society*, is at least a proper method of sociology, if not necessarily *the* proper method. And, I shall argue, it is one particularly suited to addressing some of the many major issues that confront us as citizens. Hence my subtitle – why sociologists and others should take utopia more seriously.

Utopia is a contested concept. This does not mean simply that people disagree about the content of utopia, about what the good society should be like. Rather, there is no consensus about the meaning of the term itself.

Lay understandings are generally either dismissive or hostile, seeing utopianism as at best impractical dreaming. The term 'utopia' is, of

course, drawn from Thomas More's 1516 text, in which the title is a pun on good place/ no place, transmuted into everyday thought as perfect and impossible. In this sense, our culture is saturated with utopianism. For example:

The music that was playing before I came in was Ute Lemper singing *Youkali*, Kurt Weill's setting of Roger Fernay's words:

Youkali, c'est le pays de nos desirs....  
Mais c'est un reve, une folie, Il n'y a pas de Youkali.

(Youkali is the land of our desires...But it is a dream, a foolishness; there is no Youkali).

The attribution of foolishness, accompanied by the same wistfulness, is expressed in the opening lines of W. H. Auden's *Atlantis*:

Being set on the idea  
Of getting to Atlantis  
You have discovered of course  
Only the Ship of Fools is  
Making the voyage this year.

For Harry Potter, utopian desire is presented as not merely pointless but positively dangerous. Harry spends two nights gazing at his lost family in the Mirror of Erised, around which runs the inscription 'Erised stra ehru oyt ube cafru oyt on wohsi', I show not your face but your heart's desire (Rowling 1997:157) On the third night, Professor Dumbledore intercepts Harry, and tells him that the mirror 'shows us nothing but the deepest desires of our hearts. ...However, this mirror will give us neither knowledge or truth. Men have wasted away before it, entranced by what they have seen, or not knowing if what it shows is real or even possible'. The mirror is removed to a secret location, and Dumbledore counsels Harry 'It does not do to dream and forget to live'. One could spend an entire lecture reflecting on this episode, not least the extraordinary suggestion that knowledge of the deepest desires of our own hearts constitutes neither knowledge nor truth.

Suspicion of utopia does not only arise from the assumption that it diverts people from 'real life'. Rather, as utopia is equated with

perfection and impossibility, projects to implement it are feared as dangerous and incipiently totalitarian. Al-Qaida has been described as utopian. Indeed, blame for 9/11 has even been laid at the door of Isaac Asimov's novel *Foundation*. The first episode of the current series of the BBC's *Spooks*, broadcast after the London bombings of 7 July, and depicting a terrorist attack, referred to 'blood-drenched utopias'. Sometimes this anti-utopian position co-exists with expressed desire for a transformed existence. In Ian McEwan's latest novel *Saturday*, the central protagonist Henry thinks about:

... the rare moments when musicians together touch something sweeter than they've ever found before in rehearsals or performance, beyond the merely collaborative or technically proficient, when their expression becomes as easy and graceful as friendship or love. This is when they give a glimpse of what we might be, of our best selves, and of an impossible world in which you give everything you have to others, but lose nothing of yourself.

*Out in the real world there exist detailed plans, visionary projects for peaceable realms, all conflicts resolved, happiness for everyone – mirages for which people are prepared to die and kill. Christ's kingdom on earth, the workers' paradise, the ideal Islamic state.*

But only in music, and on rare occasions, does the curtain actually lift on this dream of community, and it's tantalisingly conjured, before fading away with the last note.

McEwan 2005: 171-2.

*(McEwan, incidentally, wanted to be a blues guitarist)*

I don't have time in this lecture to deal properly with the question of totalitarianism. I would argue, however, that the problem of totalitarianism is exactly that: a problem of totalitarianism, not one of utopianism.

The problem of definition is not just a discrepancy between lay meanings and those used by social theorists or utopists, those who study utopia. In 1990, I published *The Concept of Utopia*, which set out the range of different ways in which theorists use the term, often in direct

contradiction of each other. So Marx used the term 'utopian' for those socialists whom he saw as 'unscientific', in that they did not address or understand the material basis of social change. They would have disagreed: Robert Owen's, model factory at New Lanark is now a World Heritage Site thanks to the unstinting efforts of its Director Jim Arnold and Deputy Director Lorna Davidson. Owen regarded the possibility of a better society as not only a moral necessity, but a scientific fact; and since character was, he thought, socially formed, education was key. Those same utopian socialists accepted the division between utopia and science, but regarded themselves as scientific – and reflect exactly the same ambivalence as McEwan. After all, says the French utopian Charles Fourier:

What is Utopia? It is the dream of well-being without the means of execution, without an effective method. Thus all philosophical sciences are Utopias, for they have always led people to the very opposite of the state of well-being they promised them.

(cited in Geoghegan 1987)

And if both Fourier and Marx regard Utopia as something that inhibits change, the sociologist Karl Mannheim, writing a century after Fourier, defined utopia as that which brings change about:

Only those orientations transcending reality will be referred to by us as utopian which, when they pass over into conduct, shatter, partially or wholly, the order of things prevailing at the time.

It was evident that utopianism itself varied enormously. In terms of content, certainly; but also in terms of form (a literary genre of utopia, political writing, golden age myths); in terms of location (past, future, Mars or Shangri-la); and in terms of function – for utopia may act as compensation, critique or as the catalyst of change. A definition which, like those I have mentioned, picked on one particular form or function was of no use to someone interested, as I was, in the sociology of utopia, and how those characteristics changed over time. I tried therefore to capture what all these utopian expressions had in common, and suggested a broad definition:

utopia is the expression of the desire for a better way of being or of living.

In writing that book, I was indebted to a number of people. One of them is Lyman Sargent, who isn't here tonight, and who disagreed with me, but who encouraged a generation to continue working in the then very marginal, scarcely existent, field of utopian studies. Tom Moylan has documented in his last book, *Scraps of the Untainted Sky*, the way in which this field developed from the mid-1970s as a series of improvised and overlapping conversations. His own earlier book, *Demand the Impossible*, as well as Vince Geoghegan's *Utopianism and Marxism*, preceded my own, and were invaluable resources. Together with Lucy Sargisson, whose *Feminism and Utopianism* was published in the mid-1990s, and latterly Susan Mcmanus, whose *Fictive Theories* is just out, they have been constant, challenging and supportive interlocutors over the years. And indeed Tom, as Director of the Ralahine Centre of Utopian Studies raised the general question of utopia as method in the brief for a seminar series in 2003. To Tom, Vince and Susan, who are here, thank you.

All of us have a debt to someone none of us ever met, the German theorist Ernst Bloch, born in 1885. Bloch's major work, the three-volume *The Principle of Hope* was partly written in exile in the United States in the 1930s, revised and published in the 1950s after his return to the German Democratic Republic, and translated into English in 1986.

Bloch argues that human experience is marked by lack and longing, giving rise to a utopian impulse – the propensity to long for and imagine alternative ways of being. Crucially, however, he said that this longing cannot be articulated other than through imagining the means of its fulfilment. You cannot identify what it is that is lacking without projecting what would meet that lack, without describing what is missing. In this sense, everything that reaches to a transformed existence can be considered to have a utopian aspect. His examples range across myths, fairy-tales, theatre, new clothes, alchemy, architecture and music and religion as well as the more obvious descriptions of social utopias. Bloch's work demonstrates that if we understand utopia as the desire for a better way of being or of living, then such imaginings are braided through human culture, and vary from the banal to the deeply serious, from fantasising about winning the lottery (whether or not one has a ticket) to a (sometimes) secularised version of the quest to understand who we are, why we are here and how we connect to one another. The

generic utopian content lies in the attempt to grasp the possibility of a radically different human experience, even though it is sometimes embedded in forms of fantasy that are easily dismissed as wishful thinking, or is often oblique or fragmentary.

It is precisely this theme of lack and longing that is captured by the central protagonist of *Dennis Potter's Pennies from Heaven* as 'looking for the blue'. Arthur Parker is a travelling salesman hawking the sheet music of popular songs:

Months and months I've been carrying this stuff around – these songs – all these lovely songs – I've always believed in 'em. But I didn't really know how it was or why it was that I believe in what's in here. There's things that are too big and important and too bleedn simple to put into all that lah-di-dah, toffee-nosed poetry and stuff, books and that – but everybody feels 'em ... It's looking for the blue, ennit, and the gold.

The patch of blue sky.

The gold of the bleedin' dawn, or the light in someone's eyes – *Pennies from Heaven*, that's what it is. (cited in Carpenter 1998: 350-1)

*(That's a bit of a cheat – it's actually the gold of sunset on the Birmingham-Worcester Canal rather than dawn)*

Reflecting on this later, Potter said:

Those songs stood together as a package in that they seemed to represent the same kinds of things that the psalms and fairy-tales represented: that is the most generalized human dreams, that the world should be perfect, beautiful and living and all of those things. A lot of the music is drivel ... but it does possess an almost religious image of the world as a perfect place. (Carpenter 1998: 348)

Bloch does not give equal endorsement to all manifestations of utopianism. Wishful thinking is the beginning of transformative agency, but it is only by the *education* of hope that this move can take place. Bloch challenges the dichotomy between the real and the imaginary. Utopia is a form of anticipatory consciousness. His key concept is the 'not yet', carrying the double sense of not *yet*, but an expected future presence, and still *not*, a current absence. But that which is not yet is



also real, since reality for Bloch must include the horizon of future possibilities - possibilities which are always plural, and which are dependent on human agency for their actualisation. Bloch said 'the hinge in human history is its producer'. Or, as Alan Titchmarsh put it, 'we have to put the 'heave' in heaven'.

Moreover, as the social theorist Slavoj Zizek recently pointed out, in a piece on counterfactual history called 'Lenin shot at Finland Station', these alternatives do not lie only in the future. Any world that we inhabit is also something that *might not* have happened, and those other past possibilities exist alongside us, at least in imagination, as alternative realities. Zizek suggests that for some people – perhaps including those Fredric Jameson described as 'the invisible party of utopia' – what *is* sometimes feels less real than what *should have been*.

### **How does this connect with sociology?**

Firstly, I initially came to sociology by way of utopia. The sculptor Barbara Hepworth once wrote:

I think that what we have to say is formed in childhood, and we spend the rest of our lives trying to say it.

The assumption that the world was awry, that it should be otherwise, and that one had a responsibility to make it so, was part of my inheritance.

The earliest extant photograph of my mother shows her on an outdoor speaking platform in Hammersmith in the late 1930s, around the time my father was fighting with the International Brigades in Spain.

Fifty years later, he was still campaigning on street pitches, so my own political involvement was scarcely surprising.

*I wasn't with the pagans, I just liked their banner*

Moreover, I went to university in 1968, the era of various versions of the slogan 'Be Realistic: Demand the Impossible'.

Crucially, on a wet Sunday in 1966 when I was seventeen and bored, my mother suggested that I read *News from Nowhere*. I have her copy still, alongside about fifteen other editions.

My mother's view of this utopia was that it was a nice idea but rather impractical. My father insisted that the 'important' part of the book was 'how the change came about'. I thought they had both missed the point – although I later came to realise that my mother did indeed, always and increasingly, live as though Morris's fictional society were the real reality, and the actual world around her simply a mistake.

*News from Nowhere* was written in 1890 when Morris was in his late fifties, about the age I am now. He was by this time an eminent writer and craftsman, and more recently a prominent socialist. *News from Nowhere* begins in Hammersmith, where Morris lived, and where I grew up. It opens with Hammersmith and London transformed, and ends with a journey up the river from

his London house

to his country home in Kelmscott, 137 miles away in Oxfordshire,

on the Upper Thames, whose landscape Morris loved.

*News from Nowhere* depicts a world in which work is pleasure, achieved by the abolition of unnecessary production and consumption of what John Ruskin called 'illth'. For me, its revelatory character lay in its depiction of place, and its demonstration of the interdependence of economic and social relations, the aesthetics of the built environment, and the use of space.

At the time, Hammersmith (like Bristol), was being ravaged by planners. Victorian buildings were torn down and replaced by:

concrete monstrosities (*Kings Mall, Town Hall extension*)

a trunk road which also cut through Morris's garden;

a flyover;

a betting shop which replaced the Classic Cinema.

The Lyric theatre was threatened with demolition.

So I ... decided to become an architect. The next year, I answered a question on a Cambridge entrance paper: 'The problems of urbanisation have turned architects into sociologists. Discuss'. I went to Sheffield, and switched to sociology.

While 'looking for the blue' allows for the expression of utopia to be fragmentary or fleeting, what is specifically *sociological* about Morris is the demonstration of the connectedness of work, art, social relations, space and human happiness. This connectedness, and especially the connection between individual biography and history, is the very essence of the sociological imagination. Morris preserves the element of desire at the core of utopia, but offers an argument about the condition of its realisation.

Later commentaries on utopia have used *News from Nowhere* to challenge the idea that utopia is necessarily totalitarian; and to make another, larger claim about utopia and desire, and about the function of utopian envisioning in general. The society described by Morris is a libertarian one, and the text is not intended as a blueprint. Morris himself said that any such work could only be 'an expression of the temperament of its author'. The primary function of utopia, especially in this more holistic form, is says Miguel Abensour, the *education of desire*. Utopia creates a space in which the reader is addressed not just cognitively, but experientially, and enjoined to consider and feel what it would be like not just to live differently, but to want differently – so that the taken-for-granted nature of the present is disrupted. This is what sociologists call defamiliarising the familiar.

As Edward Thompson glosses Abensour,

And in such an adventure, two things happen: our habitual values (the 'commonsense' of bourgeois society) are thrown into disarray. And we enter Utopia's proper and new-found space: *the education of desire*. This is not the same as 'a moral education' towards a given end: it is, rather, to open a way to aspiration, to 'teach desire

to desire, to desire better, to desire more, and above all to desire in a different way’.

## Sociology

If I came to sociology by way of utopia, it is of much greater significance that so also did sociology itself. The ‘utopian socialist’ Henri de Saint Simon, active in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, is recognised as one of the founders of sociology. All of Marx’s writing is infused with the desire for the world to be otherwise. The connection is also clear at the end of the nineteenth century. Morris would never have described himself as a sociologist. He was a Marxist, but he was also an exponent of a kind of Ruskinian moral economy. As far as social science and the humanities were concerned, this was a predisciplinary era. The boundaries that divide the different ‘disciplines’ of social science, and that we now try to overcome through ‘interdisciplinarity’ were not yet in place. The American sociologist Charlotte Perkins Gilman, author of the classic feminist text *Women and Economics*, also wrote a series of utopias beginning with *Herland*. Edward Bellamy’s 1888 *Looking Backward*, which was the immediate trigger for *News from Nowhere* because Morris hated it, spawned a vast political movement in the United States. I don’t think *Looking Backward* has ever been out of print. In 1948 in Britain, the *Daily Herald* carried a review which said ‘A Prophet gets reprinted – and he’s right so far’. Interestingly, *Looking Backward*, was intended as a blueprint, and has been described as a novel ‘curiously without desire’.

One can identify a list of texts that are ‘classics’ of utopianism, of feminism, of sociology, all written within a short period of each other:

- 1888 Edward Bellamy *Looking Backward*
- 1890 William Morris *News from Nowhere*
- 1893 Emile Durkheim *The Division of Labour in Society*
- 1895 Friedrich Engels *The Origins of the Family, Private Property and the State*
- 1897 Edward Bellamy *Equality*
- 1898 Charlotte Perkins Gilman *Woman and Economics*
- 1905 H. G. Wells *A Modern Utopia*
- 1911 Charlotte Perkins Gilman *Herland*

All of these contain, I would contend, a great deal of recognisable sociological explanation (even if we would now regard it as wrong), as well as a great deal of utopian aspiration, the delineation of a better world. Durkheim's book, a founding classic of sociology, is deeply utopian both in intent and content. For the last section reads the *actual* state of the world as pathological, contrasted with a benign normality which *should have* happened, and which must and will.

However, Sociology's emergence as a distinct discipline is characterised by attempts to distance it from utopia. The first full-time, permanent Chair of Sociology in Britain was created at the London School of Economics in 1907, and occupied by Leonard Trelawny Hobhouse, recently described in the British Sociological Association's Newsletter as 'lacklustre'. Maggie Studholme, whose Bristol PhD explores the bizarre exclusion of environmental concerns from twentieth century British sociology, shows that an alternative incumbent considered for this Chair was Patrick Geddes – planner, environmentalist, visionary and utopian. Utopianism and environmentalism were thus simultaneously sidelined.

Wells's claim about the intrinsic relation between sociology and utopia was made only two years later, in 1909, in an essay called 'The So-called Science of Sociology', attacking the scientific pretensions of the emergent discipline. It hides in a volume published in 1914 called *An Englishman Looks at the World*, and which may be the only work by Wells never to have been reprinted. The University Library owns a copy although I had to have it retrieved from store. In an era when shortage of space and the supposed merits of electronic data access favour the disposal and pulping of old books: we should keep them – you never know when they will be needed.

Wells, as I said at the outset, argued that

The creation of utopias – and their exhaustive criticism – is the proper and distinctive method of sociology.

For Wells, utopianism is a kind of speculative sociology, an attempt to explore and predict what might be, and to expose it to judgement. He also argues that sociology cannot avoid the utopian. If moral judgements

about what should be are not made explicit, they will lurk unseen – where they are less susceptible to criticism and judgement. As he puts it:

there is no such thing in sociology as dispassionately considering what is, without considering what is intended to be. ... Sociologists cannot help making utopias: though they avoid the word, though they deny the idea with passion, their very silences shape a utopia' (Wells 1914: 203-5).

The parallels between sociology and utopia, if utopia is understood in its more holistic sense, are indeed striking. But sociology foregrounds what utopia backgrounds, and utopia foregrounds what sociology represses:

Sociological models of how the world works are explicitly holistic, descriptive, explanatory and present (or past) oriented. They are, necessarily, imaginary. The construction of a model or theory about how society works IS an imaginary reconstitution of society. Such models are sometimes explicitly critical, normative, and prescriptive, but more usually implicitly so. Those of us who work on inequalities of health, of class, of gender or in the field of ethnic relations frequently – I would say usually – work with the embedded assumption that such inequalities are wrong and should as far as possible be eliminated. And in so far as *any* implications for politics or policy may flow from sociological work, it is, implicitly, future-oriented, and about the education of hope.

Utopian models, on the other hand, are explicitly holistic, imaginary, critical, normative, prescriptive and (often) future-oriented. On the other hand, most of them contain descriptions of present conditions, not just as a foil for the better utopia, but as a generalised explanation of how social processes work, and therefore what needs to change. In this sense, they are present-oriented – so much so that some commentators would say that utopias are *always* primarily about the present, their function *always* primarily critical. But utopia involves the imaginary reconstitution of society in a slightly different sense: it is, precisely, the imagining of a reconstituted society, society imagined otherwise, rather than merely society imagined.

Establishing the parallels between sociology and utopia does not necessarily demonstrate that utopia is either a distinctive, or a good, method for sociology. It could after all be a reason to take sociology less

seriously, rather than to take utopia more seriously. However, my contention is that by thinking about utopia as a method, we can address more effectively major problems that confront us.

I want to illustrate this in relation to three issues:

- Social exclusion and inclusion, on which I have done a considerable amount of work, so that some people may be surprised that this is not the overall topic of my inaugural lecture.
- International Poverty
- Sustainable futures

These latter two are areas in which I have not yet done any extensive work, but are areas where I think a utopian method could be put to good effect – although the scale of the research agenda is intimidating.

The Imaginary Reconstitution of Society as a method has three modes. The first two of these are an analytical, *archaeological* mode and a constructive, *architectural* one; the third is, for want of a better term, *ontological*.

Much of my work as a sociologist has addressed contemporary politics and policy. Thus in the 1980s, in collaboration with other including Miriam David, I explored the contradictory ideas of the good society in relation to the New Right. In the late 1990s, I undertook a similar analysis of New Labour, this time focusing on their interpretation of ‘social exclusion’, a slippery concept which has come to dominate the policy agenda of the European Union. *The Inclusive Society?* has in common with *The Concept of Utopia* that it sets out competing and usually implicit meanings, and offers at least a critique, and to some extent at least an alternative definition. But it also involved, as did the work on the New Right, setting out the idea of the good society that underpins the policy and rhetoric of New Labour, and the contradictions in this – such as the contradiction between seeking participation in the Labour Force by 80 per cent of the population, and purporting to value the unpaid work of caring and parenting. This is an *archaeological* exercise, in that it involves digging around in speeches and policy documents, and piecing together actions, statements and silences into something resembling a

coherent whole. In the case of New Labour, this is of course a meritocracy. Ironically, although Blair uses this term with approbation it was actually coined in 1958 as the title of a *dystopia* by Michael Young, who also wrote the 1945 Labour manifesto. The point of *The Rise of the Meritocracy*, as Young reiterated in 2000, was that meritocracy was ultimately neither possible nor desirable, if only because the middle classes will do anything to prevent their dimmer offspring from descending the social scale.

The meaning of social inclusion, for New Labour, is almost entirely inclusion in paid work. Taken together with their assault by dubious legal means on 'crime and anti-social behaviour', one might echo William Morris's plaint in favour of free speech:

'They would clear the streets of coster-mongers, organs, processions and lecturers of all kinds, and make them a sort of decent prison corridors, with people just trudging to and from their work'.

If New Labour's utopia is peculiar, there is nothing peculiar about the fact that it has one. Such images of the good society are present in every political position. And it is notable that while others' visions of the good society – in McEwan's terms, Christ's Kingdom upon Earth, the workers' paradise, the ideal Islamic state – are designated utopian (and dangerous), this is less commonly said of western democracy. Yet there is clearly an idea of the good society behind the foreign policy of the Us and the UK, as well as an intent to impose it. Moreover, this might well be said, in Fourier's words, to 'have ... led people to the very opposite of the state of well-being they promised them'.

The point of such archaeology is to lay the underpinning model of the good society open to scrutiny and to public critique. I have also tried to *rethink* what social inclusion might mean in terms of social relationships and quality of life, and to examine the *empirical* relationship between work, poverty, and social inclusion, with a view to considering what would be necessary to a genuinely inclusive society. Among the conditions of this are the abolition of poverty and the reduction of inequality.



This last piece of work was undertaken in collaboration with colleagues in the Townsend Centre for the Study of International Poverty, notably David Gordon, Christina Pantazis and Peter Townsend.

And that leads me to my second example of how the archaeological and architectural modes of utopian method might work. About three weeks ago the Townsend Centre held a meeting to discuss potential bids for a very large tranche of funding that has been made available by the Economic and Social Research Council and the Department for International Development for research into the abolition of global poverty. Besides a whole range of projects looking at the practical detail of development, and for example how gender equality reduces poverty, there seems to be a need for an overarching project which sociology is uniquely placed to carry out – but which requires this double utopian mode.

Firstly, we need to excavate policy documents and policies at national and international level to reveal the underpinning image of the good society within which this abolition of poverty is to sit, and which will result from that abolition. And we need to question whether it is coherent, sustainable or good: whether in fact what is implied if not actually envisaged is a possible, or a desirable, world. And secondly we need to step outside the conceptual and policy frameworks of the ESRC and DfID – and the World Bank – and address the question of what kind of society would make the abolition of global poverty genuinely possible. This involves holistic modelling, the Imaginary Reconstitution of Society in architectural mode. And it may be that this will necessarily be what Lyman Sargent calls a flawed utopia – one in which there is a price to pay – rather than the win-win situations we are constantly promised by Government. If we really want to Make Poverty History, what will be the cost? Is it the case, as Herbert Marcuse argued some decades ago, that sufficiency for all is possible, but only by the sacrifice of manipulated comforts and over-consumption by some – probably including all of us in this room?

Even without the detailed documentation that such a research agenda would entail, it is evident that the global political agenda is dominated by a utopia of unlimited growth. The third issue which sociologists should be addressing, but on the whole are not, is the question of sustainable futures. Here too, there is a need for both archaeology, of present

policies and proposals; and architecture. What, for example, are the implications of global warming for social life, for how, and indeed where, we might live? It is not just global warming that is at issue here, although its consequences in terms of climate change and the habitability of parts of the earth seem to be being explored by everyone except sociologists. Resource consumption must also be considered. The argument that economic growth is unsustainable is supported by the calculation of ecological footprints – the area of the earth needed to sustain the lifestyles of humanity, nations or individuals, including the area of forest needed to absorb carbon dioxide emissions. London has an ecological footprint 125 times its size, roughly equivalent to the entire productive land area of Britain. If everyone in the world used resources at this rate, we would need three planets rather than one. If everyone used resources at the rate of the US, we would need at least five planets. Development and growth on the present model is impossible. If car ownership in China were to reach the levels of the West, there would be huge implications for greenhouse emissions and global warming. Even if these emissions can be reduced by a technical fix, there is no such technical fix possible for the land use implications, in terms both of roads to drive on and space to park stationary vehicles. Looked at in this way, it is perhaps the project of continuing economic growth that appears utopian in the pejorative sense, rather than the imagining of alternatives. And if the commitment to growth seems impossible to stop – perhaps the right response is indeed, we are realists, we not only dream, but demand, the impossible.

You can go to this website to calculate your own individual ecological footprint and explore the lifestyle changes needed to reduce it: become a vegetarian, live in a smaller house, get rid of your car and don't fly.

[www.earthday.org/footprint](http://www.earthday.org/footprint)

The point of the Imaginary Reconstitution of Society, though, is that rather than positing individual lifestyle changes, it suggests a more *holistic* look at the *collective* alternatives open to us. Some parts of this are obvious: if you want people to use buses and trains instead of cars and planes, it has to be a viable option in terms of both time and cost. If you want people not to drive to the shops, it's no use sticking them out at

Cribbs Causeway. But all our systems of production, consumption and distribution – and the structures of desires and wants that accompany them – need to be looked at holistically.

Utopians and science fiction writers have done a rather better job in the past of considering ‘what if’ than sociologists have, precisely because of the suppression of utopianism within sociology. *An Englishman Looks at the World* contains an extraordinary essay, written seventeen months after Wells witnessed Bleriot’s flight across the Channel. What, said Wells, in ‘Off the Chain’ will be the impact of this? Wells anticipates globalisation, mass migration, and what sociologists eighty years later described as space-time compression and disembedding. Swift, secure and cheapened transport will sever the ties that bind people to place. There are he says already (in 1910) increasing numbers of people uninterested in what happens in their own locality because they are oriented to a wider arena. In contemporary terms, they don’t care where they live as long as it is near an international airport. Wells predicts a long drawn out conflict between the globalising implications of air travel and its usefulness to international finance and business, and the existing structures of government and the nation state. Mind you, Wells got some things wrong in this piece: he predicted also the decline of national loyalties, and failed to predict the contribution of aeroplane emissions to global warming.

It is, of course, much more complicated than that. No actual imaginary reconstitution of society can adequately articulate the desire for a better life; nor can it at the practical level resolve all present problems without producing new ones. Moreover, Wells was working with a very modernist model of utopia, and of sociology. What was *modern* about *A Modern Utopia* for Wells was that it was global, and that it was kinetic, by which he meant it was not a static blueprint but recognised the necessity of historical change and development within the good society. Over the last century, utopia has become more fragmentary, cautious, and open, and concerned more with process than with content. This is documented in relation to literary utopias in Tom Moylan’s *Demand the Impossible*, which coins the term critical utopia for these increasingly reflexive and internally critical narratives. In the last century, sociology has tended to abandon prediction, holism and explanation, in favour of partial accounts and ‘thick description’. At the same time, social theory is suffused with

critical and utopian content – although it is always equivocal about this, largely because it treats utopia as goal rather than as method.

And the third mode of the utopian method, the *ontological* mode, gives us further pause for thought. The designation of utopia as a space for the education of desire underlines the point that the imagination of society otherwise involves imagining ourselves otherwise. In *A Modern Utopia* Wells encounters his 'best self' - taller, stronger, more elegant and a member of the ruling elite, but eminently recognisable. McEwan, too, in that passage about musical performance, speaks of 'a glimpse of what we might be, of our best selves'. Clearly, the utopian project must address the constitution of the selves that inhabit it, and their structures of feeling. 'Looking for the blue' is not just about the projection of a desired object to meet our needs, but a projected subject, ourselves in some sense redeemed. 'Oh brave new world, that has such people in it'. This is dangerous territory. Marx declined to outline the features of his preferred society (although others have used archaeological methods to extrapolate it) because he said that it was impossible to predict the needs and wants of the future. Fredric Jameson has argued that the imagination of Utopia is impossible because it requires us to transcend not just where, but who, we are – and that imagining a self radically transformed holds the terror of annihilation. Jameson, however, does not think this is a reason not to try to imagine Utopia. Like Bloch, in the end he is more concerned *that* we imagine than *what* we imagine. Necessary failure does not make the attempt itself any less necessary. As Morris put it:

Men fight and lose the battle, and what they fought for comes about in spite of their defeat, and when it comes turns out to be not what they meant, and other men have to fight for what they meant under a different name.

William Morris: A Dream of John Ball

Necessary failure, however, has implications for the character of the utopian method itself. Above all, it requires that models of utopian futures be multiple, provisional and reflexive. And if sociology has, in my view, a particular contribution to make to setting out these possible futures of the not-yet, these issues are far too important to be left to sociologists,

utopists or any other group of 'experts'. And that brings me to my last point, which also touches on fear about utopia.

Wells suggests not just that sociologists can and must create utopias, but that these should be subject to exhaustive critique. But Wells himself had a very Fabian and dirigiste view of the role of the intellectual middle classes. Morris, on the other hand, argued that it was important that the vision of new society should be kept before the eyes of the working people. I would argue that if sociology has a role in positing alternatives for the future, as a method for addressing the future it should owe more to Brecht than to Wells. In Jameson's *Brecht on Method* he argues that although Brecht's method is didactic, this is not in the sense of a moral education towards a given end. It always demands from the audience a judgement, or at least a judgement about a judgement, rather than simply the presentation or imposition of a judgement. In other words, utopia as method beyond sociology requires the responsible participation of citizens, not the dictat of experts. But if sociologists and citizens do not address these problems, our very silences will shape not utopian but dystopian futures.

I hope that I have made some sense. I also hope that I have managed incidentally to show that academic life is necessarily collaborative and communicative, even in these days of increased pressure, individualism, competitiveness and the Research Assessment Exercise. There are many people with whom I have collaborated over my years at Bristol, and others whose support and encouragement has been crucial. They include Steve Fenton, Will Guy, Jackie West, Harriet Bradley, Gregor McLennan and Peter Townsend. Thanks too to those younger and more technologically competent colleagues who have encouraged and assisted this first encounter with Powerpoint – Paula Surridge, Jon Fox, Esther Dermott and Kath Kerbes; to the technicians here tonight; and above all to Rob Hunter. Lastly, I would like to thank all of you for coming, for not obviously doing sudoku and for not flicking ink pellets during the lecture. Doubtless they will come later, as I know they are richly deserved, so I will end with a plea from Yeats, which incidentally returns us to Dennis Potter's blue and gold:

**H**ad I the heavens' embroidered cloths  
Enwrought with golden and silver light,  
The blue and the dim and the dark cloths  
Of night and light and the half-light,  
I would spread the cloths under your feet:  
But I, being poor, have only my dreams;  
I have spread my dreams under your feet;  
Tread softly, because you tread on my dreams.

A utopian society (or at least one much better than ours) is perfectly possible in theory. But there are two major obstacles: 1. There is currently a mismatch between what people want and are able to do and what society requires them to do (in o...  
Originally Answered: What are serious, specific, and significant reasons why a utopia is impossible? A utopian society (or at least one much better than ours) is perfectly possible in theory. They are sites that have a general relation of direct or inverted analogy with the real space of Society. I think it is impossible because of the pure economic cost it would take to keep said society running ; the power would never run out, the food is always good, the general demographic is more polite due to lack of poverty, etc. Utopian Society - Utopias Types. The word utopia was first originated in the literary works of the 1st century BC Classical Greek philosopher and mathematician, Plato. Created from the Greek words eu ("good"), ou ("no") and topos ("place"), utopia represented an unobtainable perfect society or community, in which social, economic, environmental, and scientific conditions were ideal. It has also spawned other concepts, most notably anti-utopia or dystopia (which describes societies where the way of life is heavily influenced by the oppressive and all-powerful state control). Over the centuries, there were many proposed types of utopias. Hence my subtitle why sociologists and others should take utopia more seriously. Utopia is a contested concept. This does not mean simply that people disagree about the content of utopia, about what the good society should be like. Rather, there is no consensus about the meaning of the term itself. Lay understandings are generally either dismissive or hostile, seeing utopianism as at best impractical dreaming. More's work influenced many writers to follow in the utopian, as well as dystopian, genres. In 1552, author Antonio Francesco Doni published *I Mondi*, while Francesco Patrizi published *La Città felice* in 1553. Both works reflected More's model society view. Francis Bacon published his book *New Atlantis* in 1627, approaching the concept of utopia with a realistic look at science and a more abstract view on religion and philosophy. In 1888, a utopian book was published which viewed the concept from an economic viewpoint, called *Looking Backward, 2000-1887*. Bellamy was unhappy about the injustice in the socio-economic system and, like other utopian writers, put forth a concept of an ideal world. Many critics see Utopia as foreshadowing the communist state, as defined by Karl Marx (1818-1883) and Frederick Engels (1820-1895) in their *Communist Manifesto* (1848) and adopted by the governments of Soviet Russia and China. It is true that Utopia is a communist society, and anyone who reads the *Communist Manifesto* will be struck by certain similarities with Utopia. It should be noted, however, that Marx planned a classless society; the inequities that emerged in communist Russia and China were at odds with his intention. In addition, the representative democracy practiced in Utopia was not a feature of totalitarian communist states. In Utopia, on the other hand, everyone has enough for his needs and no one is left to suffer if he can no longer work.